Fangs of Despair
A Danganronpa Vampire Zine

Fangs of Despair

A Danganronpa Vampire Zine

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

As a big fan of vampires...

I would like to say thank you to the "*fang*"tastic team for making this zine come to life!

Seeing everyone's pieces was genuinely a ton of fun and my vampire loving heart was fed very well!

This also couldn't have been done without the help of our mod team so thank you so so much for all of the hard work and trust throughout it all! And last but not least, thank you for purchasing the zine!

We sincerely hope you enjoyed the stories of bites and blood!

- zetsubobu

I would like to give a huge thank you to everyone who worked on this project!

The contributors who worked for months to create beautiful pieces for the zine, the mod team for making sure the zine goes smoothly, and of course everyone who supported the zine for making this zine possible to begin with! Despite not being that well versed in vampire media, I had a lot of fun working with everyone and I'm so glad to see this zine finally come to life. Also! Thank you Cecilia for bringing me into the project and letting me co-head mod with you, and to whoever is reading,

I hope you enjoy reading the rest of the zine!

- RainbowCheshire

Table of Contents

Cover

Cover Art by caeryn

8 *If Your Dear Heart is Wounded*

Story by Karakuri
Spot Art by Rainbow

13

Art by emmy

14

Art by gay_papa

15 *Opposite of an Offal*

Story by rose

19

Art by Ravensa

20

Art by lillachan

21

Art by Partyu

22 *Universal Donor*

Story by Jimcloud

30

Art by Villain

31

Art by grrotto

32

Art by Michelle

33 *Symbiosis*

Story by Emi

36

Comic by Lydia

40 *A Rock and a Hard Place*

Story by ToxicPineapple
Spot Art by Nia

46

Art by Medi

47

Art by Lynn

48 *Parasite, Parasocial*

Story by Kalcifer
Spot Art by emmy

52

Art by Roarsh

53 *Toiling With Your Blood (I Remember Something)*

Story by Bandit
Spot Art by Kirisstar

64

Art by Meteoris

65

Art by Mango

66 *Fangs on Film*

Story by Keane
Spot Art by Ravensa

74

Art by Mae

Table of Contents

75 *Living Off Sympathy*

Story by Rumi

Art by Avis

Comic by thefloralpeach

84 *Rantaro Amami and the Legend of the Immortal Children*

Story by Nelly
Spot Art by Foldable Mattress

Art by justsomedumbstuff

Art by FaeOfStars

94 *The Bloodsucker's Trail*

Story by Jimcloud
Spot Art by zetsubobu

Art by Serrannitto

103 *Forever Linked*

Story by Emi
Spot Art by Villain

Art by gayest.of.them.all

Art by fluttervixen

110 *The Lure of Sharp Fangs*

Story by Bandit

Table of Contents

Art by sketchy.png

Art by Ckara

121 *A Prayer for the Jugular*

Story by rose

Art by TwinkleLitchii

Art by Kirisstar

129 *Power Surge*

Story by ToxicPineapple

Art by Colaluu

136 *Merch Spotlight*

140 *Credits*

If Your Dear Heart is Wounded

Story by Karakuri | Spot Art by Rainbow

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Red leaves hang low as Hiyoko stares into the koi pond in the courtyard.

That morning, her miso soup had been poisoned, and she had been terribly sick all day. The only people who'd had access to the kitchen were the cook who made most of her food and her mother's maidservant, a pretty (but not too pretty) young lady from a branch family. The prime suspect is obvious. But it isn't up to Hiyoko to decide what would be done about her.

Through the wall of the mansion's infirmary, between bouts of nausea and stomach cramps, she had heard her parents' voices for the first time in months: her mother, defending her maidservant, who had been flattering and pampering her for years; her father, defending Hiyoko's safety, begging only for the maidservant to be kept out of the kitchen, and no more.

She'd heard a slap.

She'd heard him falling.

Hiyoko had struggled to her feet, forced her wobbling legs to stand, and gotten as far as putting her hand on the door before stopping. Her grandmother's voice still rang in her ears, telling her she was never to see her parents again. What was she to do?

In the end, it had been Hiyoko's own cowardice that made her too weak to protect her dear father.The fading sun sinks swiftly below the horizon. Before she knows it, all she can see is the rippling circle of moonlight in the water and the bats circling overhead. One of them swoops over her shoulder, and she turns, startled, to find—not a bat, but a girl standing with eyes agleam in the darkness, red as the blaze of autumn leaves.

The strange girl smiles, and it is her father's smile. She speaks as though she hears every little voice in Hiyoko's heart, and with a deep empathy the young dancer has seldom encountered in her life, she promises to see Hiyoko as she is, and not as what she can be used for. She tells Hiyoko that there had never been anyone worth protecting, that her skills belong to herself alone, and that the deepest well of strength in the world comes from apathy.

Hiyoko allows those cold, slender fingers to run through her hair as she listens. They are not as soft or warm as her father's fingers, but they feel familiar on her scalp, like she is five years old again and listening to him tell her for the hundredth time the story of how he and her mother met and fell in love.

Those fingers pull away from her all too soon. As the kind stranger turns to leave, Hiyoko calls out to her on impulse, asking her name.

"Junko Enoshima," she says.

On the way back to her room, Hiyoko's grandmother catches her and scolds her for missing the day's dance practice, as though Hiyoko hadn't been ill and suffering for hours on end, and had only been lazy and spoilt.

This time, Hiyoko calls her a hag to her face. This time, she brushes off her threats, which ring hollow, now, in the emptiness of her heart that has learned to embrace apathy. This time, she simply turns, walks away, and closes the door to her room, ignoring her grandmother all the while.

It makes her feel strong for the first time in her life. It excites her so much that she cannot sleep.

When, later that night, a certain bat alights at her window, she invites her in without hesitation.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Snow crunches under Fuyuhiko's steel-toed boots as he paces, restless, behind his house.

Next to him, a line of splotches leads around the corner, bright spots of red slowly sinking into the snow. Peko had refused his help again. She had called herself merely a tool again. She had walked off to treat her own wounds, and although she remains so close by, he

cannot hear what she is doing over the continued sound of his parents fighting in the house—with literal knives and guns—over what to get for takeout.

Fuyuhiko paces, restless in his hesitation. His heart would not let him see Peko as a tool. (His pride reminds him that he had never wanted a tool.) And his honour says that because she had gotten injured while protecting him, he owes her a favour, alongside the hundred more he already owes…

Peko would never allow him to repay her.

Fuyuhiko paces, restless, next to the dotted line drawn in Peko's blood. Each time, he stops short of turning the corner. He knows it is cowardice. If Natsumi saw him like this—well, it would just be more proof that she would make a better leader, wouldn't it?—

The sky darkens around him, and the floodlights in the courtyard flick on. Silhouetted against their light, with gleaming eyes as red as Peko's, is a girl.

The stranger answers Fuyuhiko's wariness with distance and respect. She speaks to him seemingly without moving her lips, her face locked into the icy doll-like expression Peko often wears, and her intense crimson gaze seems to root him to the ground. She tells him three truths: that as a son, his task is to claim his destiny; that as a yakuza, his task is to claim his throne; that as a man, his task is to claim his woman.

His woman. He feels suddenly dizzy. Until now, he had shied away from thinking of Peko that way, but it all seems to make sense when he does.

The stranger has somehow gotten closer to him, and now stands at his side like a knight. She gives the trail of blood an oddly hungry glance, and then smiles and places her hand firmly on his back. He accepts the push.

As her cold touch fades into the winter air, he asks her name.

"Junko Enoshima," she says.

This time, Fuyuhiko follows the trail of blood around the corner. This time, he takes Peko's bandaged hand in his. He leads her back inside the house, where his father is reloading and his mother is prying a dagger out of the wall, and with his swordswoman on his arm, he demands, on pain of death, for them to *cut it out*.

Snow blows in from the doorway behind him, and his fervent pulse fills the silence that follows.

When he turns and sees the strange girl still standing at the threshold, he invites her in to join him.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Cherry petals flutter down around Mikan as she picks her skirt up from the ground.

The woods behind the school are quiet as she picks through her pockets, but she hears laughter in the distance as students walk out of the gates with their new friends. Sunlight spills through the flowering branches. A soft breeze ruffles the grass. It is a beautiful day to mark the beginning of the new school year.

Her skin feels warm where her new classmates had slapped her.

Mikan's trembling fingers steady when she finds her first-aid kit. With practiced ease, she cleans and bandages the wound on her arm. She zips up her skirt, adjusts her socks, and starts to button her blouse, except—

One of her buttons is missing.

She drops to her knees and starts searching, running her fingers through the grass. A button on her brand-new uniform is missing. If… If she were to go home like this…

If…

The thought almost makes her freeze up, but she forces herself to keep searching.

The wind picks up, and Mikan shivers. When did it get so cold? So dark? The streetlight flickers on, and standing under it, bathed in that artificial glow as though it is her very own spotlight, is a girl.

Before Mikan can react, the girl is suddenly right before her, blood-red eyes gazing into her eyes, long nails tilting her chin up with little pricks of pain. They dig in hard enough to draw blood, pulling her to her feet.

The stranger leans down and softly kisses the blood off Mikan's chin. She smiles. She licks her lips. She tells Mikan that she is delectable, and when she sees the uncertainty that quivers in every line of her body, she tells her more: that she is perfect as she is; that silly mistakes like hers ought to be forgiven; that if nobody else will forgive her, she will.

A last drop of blood falls from Mikan's chin and lands on the stranger's finger, sparkling like the jewel on an engagement ring. Between the pain and the gentleness, for the very first time, Mikan falls in love.

With a dizzied gasp in her voice, Mikan cannot help but ask the stranger's name.

“Junko Enoshima,” she says.

On her way home, Mikan walks steadily for the first time in years. Her parents have finished dinner without her, and her mother looks up from her ironing as she opens the door. She calls Mikan useless for being late, and when she sees the blouse gaping open where the button is missing, she even calls her a slut.

This time, Mikan laughs—she giggles with a fresh, new innocence. This time, when her mother approaches her with the clothes-iron in hand, she flips the ironing board at her with a flick of her arm and walks away from the sound of shocked screeching and sizzling skin.

For this, too, she will be forgiven. With this certainty in her heart, Mikan giggles to herself as she tosses and turns, sleepless.

When, in the darkness before dawn, Junko comes knocking, she smiles and invites her to stay.

Opposite of an Offal

Story by rose

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Ishimaru's blood simmered with such a potent iron tang, likened to the aroma of seared meat, that Oowada's mouth watered.

In the sweltering heat of the sauna, Ishimaru's taut skin burned as scarlet as the striking hue of his eyes. He hadn't flinched at the rising temperature; he welcomed it, permitting the heat to color his tight flesh with the intoxicating bloom of magma in his veins. Ishimaru roasted alive, braving the assault with his teeth bared wide for Oowada, insisting he would not bend. It only enhanced the palpable richness of his savory bloodstream.

Oowada's stomach snarled, had he not clenched it. He jammed his nails through his callused palms to calm himself, the sharp pain a negligible distraction. He hadn't realized such an error in judgment was made until Naegi left. He assumed Ishimaru would have faltered, surrendering to Oowada's oppressive will, but Ishimaru met him in the middle. Barb for barb, laugh for laugh, man to man, he countered and appraised Oowada with a scowl that softened to a heartfelt smile.

Truly, he looked good enough to eat. Oowada pierced his thumbnail into his forefinger, denying his temptation, when he realized how close he shifted to Ishimaru's strong, sturdy neck.

With his heavy attire sagging on his body, it was a matter of time until Ishimaru dressed himself. Oowada had insisted he needed air, diving through the entrance mere seconds after Ishimaru nodded. Once outside, his other mistake was abundantly clear, as he discovered his Monopad had broken under the duress of the extreme heat. He scowled, fidgeting with a screen that refused to be anything other than black. He had half a mind to whip it across the corridor.

His nostrils twitched, and so did he. The puissance of Ishimaru's blood was too great. Not even the tasteless, circulating draft of the air conditioning helped. Despite the chill caressing Oowada's prickling, damp body, nothing soothed his onslaught of hunger. It formed an aching pit in his stomach, a need quenched only by the deaths of those whom society wouldn't mourn.

The Crazy Diamonds rode at night. A sole reason existed for why he executed such a stiff edict. No one argued against him, not when they ruled the streets. Whoever did risked becoming a meal for blatant insubordination. When Oowada needed to feast, they averted their gaze, permitting their leader to indulge in the thrill of victory. Even if they were scum,

rival *bosozoku* who threatened his sundown dominance, Oowada never relished how the light faded from their eyes. However, he sighed in self-soothing satisfaction as his hunger subsided for the evening.

But this was far worse. Surrounded by innocent students, he couldn't select them to fulfill himself. Even if one or two presented themselves with their noses high in the sky, they were classmates. Together, they were ensnared in a killing game. Three of them had already lost their lives. He couldn't forget the shock on Enoshima's face as spears sliced through her scrawny body, nor how her muscles slackened as she toppled. He was compelled to cover her with his treasured jacket, believing she was as much of a victim as Maizono and Kuwata, both dead because of their desperate struggle to survive. No one deserved such a cruel fate.

He shook his head. Ishimaru was going to be ready soon.

As Oowada listened to clothes rustling inside the bathhouse, he snuck his hand into the deep pocket of his sagging coat. He gripped his treasure, pilfered from a place no one usually inspected. Twice a day, he slunk inside and grabbed a handful. Such a conspicuous action was bound to be discovered, or, as Oowada winced, he wondered if someone was already suspicious of such apparent thievery.

Then again, with the quantity of cameras around them, they were like ants under many magnifying glasses. The unseen mastermind observed every second of their day. No one was safe, not even in their beds. Whoever had them in their thrall, they must have been enjoying a repeat of Oowada's private show as the plastic container gave way to the piercing of his fangs.

He shivered. Frustration instantly replaced with unwinding calm. The blood bags from the nurse's office served as a satisfactory substitute. It was as easy as drinking from a juice pouch, guzzling the thick, lukewarm liquid. He closed his eyes and often enjoyed the dense taste of its coppery flavor. He hadn't had his fill throughout the day, his hunger pangs reaching a feverish need in the sauna, and as he swallowed, Oowada lost himself to complacent tranquility, his vexation similar to muscle memory.

He drank too quickly, too recklessly. Like a melted, metallic milkshake, his beverage glided over his tongue. Grinning as it streamed down his throat, it might not itched what Oowada needed scratched, but it was better than starving.

Just as he could have finished, the fog in his mind dispersed enough for him to hear thudding boots and note the stretching shadow.

"A-ah! What the-? Oowada-kun!"

He froze. Brick red dots beaded on the corners of his mouth. They slithered and dribbled over his chin to the tiled floor. All at once, his stomach knotted, pooling with acidic nausea.

Standing in the doorway, with pupils like ink blots, Ishimaru offered a pithy, strained grin.

Oowada, who hunched forward like a true vagrant with the blood bag slipping from his stained fangs, didn't hear its wet *splat* as it dropped between his shoes.

"What…were, uh, are you doing?" Ishimaru asked, tone beyond strained. He jerked his head up and down. "Is that-? Uh, is that-? A-ah, right, the stockpile in the nurse's office appeared to be a little, um, sparse. I overheard Kirigiri-kun telling Nae-! A-anyway! Are you-? Could you be-?"

He struggled for words. Stammering never suited him. They might have known each other for mere days, but all the same, his lack of composure unnerved Oowada. All he could do was feel the growing tension in his face as thin, dark streams filled the tile crevices.

Shaking his head, Ishimaru sharply cleared his throat. He rolled his shoulders back, squaring them. He stared at Oowada with eyes as brilliant as blood. Despite the bitter horror emanating from his flesh, he still pulsated with warmth.

He glanced again at the blood bag and inhaled deeply through his nose.

"The Crazy Diamonds ride at night," Ishimaru stated. "Isn't that what you said?"

Unclenching his hands, Oowada bent and pinched the soggy, deflated, plastic slab. He hadn't inspected which type it was. It never mattered.

He crushed it, splattering blood over his knuckles. "And here's the goddamn reason why," he murmured with every sordid ounce of ruination.

Ishimaru examined his hand, then brought his attention to Oowada's face. He stepped forward, one boot after the other. He sidestepped the smears on the floor and checked over his shoulder, testing the tendons in his neck. Oowada repressed a shiver as he spied his fluttering pulse. It skimmed against his damp skin, and as his mind began to race with impulsive possibilities, he nearly jumped out of his own flesh when Ishimaru seized his wrist.

"Come to my room."

He spoke with the authority granted by his merited talent. Ooward hardly had a chance to splutter through his protests as Ishimaru dragged him to the dorms. He didn't react to Oowada's demands to be released, already unlocking his door by the time Oowada realized where they stood. Oowada stumbled in after him, discarding the sticky bag in the trash and noting the overall cleanliness of Ishimaru's quarters. Nary a scrap of trash was littered.

Furthering Oowada's bewilderment, Ishimaru rolled up his sleeve, and extending his proffered wrist, he said, "Here."

"What?" Oowada hissed, fangs catching on his lower lip, his stomach flipping. "Are you crazy? You know what I am, but you're-"

"Isn't 'crazy' in the name of your gang?" he countered, and lowered his voice, hardly a warble to be heard. "I can't forget what I witnessed. Asking me would be impossible."

The muscles in his arms flexed. "What's your point?"

"My point is the same as when we dueled. I want to understand you." Ishimaru peered at his wrist. "I know there's going to be a lot I can't quite fathom about your, erm, situation,

but in a place such as this-”

He smiled, invoking the luster of brilliant sunshine; Oowada could have scorched before his radiance.

“-I want to be in your corner as someone you can trust. I’ll safeguard your secret, Oowada-kun, and this is how I can.”

Speech failed Oowada. He couldn’t move; his heels tethered him in place. He stared at Ishimaru as if he had collapsed in a heap of contorted limbs. Ishimaru’s promise rattled his brain, jarring every semblance of expectations. He should have fled or cowered.

But Ishimaru’s declarations were as pure as his motivations. A man of his caliber was a rarity, a needle in a haystack. Rather than recoiling and abandoning Oowada, Ishimaru swore on their newfound bond, stoked by the fires of their similarities and struggles. Whatever trepidation Ishimaru had felt long fled, replaced with stalwart courage, and as Oowada’s shoulders sagged under the weight of his realization, his words choked him.

“You’re something else. Who the hell would do this for m-?” He raised his gaze, meeting Ishimaru in the middle. “You would, wouldn’t ya? You should be runnin’ scared, but you ain’t that kind of man.”

A promise without complications tethered them together. He reveled in Ishimaru’s trust and basked in a hope he hadn’t felt in ages. While the intoxicating aroma of Ishimaru’s blood swelled in his pulse, it was no longer a temptation, but a sincere solution overcoming silent despair.

Oowada grasped Ishimaru’s wrist. He thumbed along the veins, watching the pale blue lines traveling up his arm. He traced his tongue over his fangs, tensing his legs to prevent his shudders from becoming too obvious.

“Uh, please, don’t take a lot, though. I want to remain lucid,” Ishimaru quickly requested, “and not be turned, if that’s something we’re risking.”

The corner of Oowada’s mouth lifted. He wouldn’t dream of it.

As he carefully pricked his fangs centimeters into Ishimaru’s wrist, Oowada caught how Ishimaru grimaced and bore it with a smile.

Truly, in his veins, Ishimaru carried savory ambrosia.

Universal Donor

Story by Jimcloud

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

I don't know what manages to keep me going until I get through my door. But whatever it is, it doesn't last any longer than that. I close it and lean my body against the wood, sliding down to the floor.

Ugh. Everything aches.

I rest my head against the door and sigh. I messed up bad. I try not to strike in the same place too often – since I don't kill my targets anymore, it's risky. I chanced it this time, though, and... I paid for it. Silver, stakes, holy water, the works. I guess that's what it takes to take me down, but I don't feel good about it.

Now what, though? I don't know if I can get up. My legs sting. My hands are burning still. I haven't felt this weak since I was human. This floor is uncomfortable. If I could just move, maybe...

"Harumaki?"

I snap to attention. Shit. "Kaito?"

He's awake? I look over at the window's curtains, to the centimeter of light peeking out. It's not sunup yet, but there's a bit of light... so it must be predawn. Five or six in the morning? Yeah, guess he'd be up.

Damn it.

"Are you okay?" Kaito shouts, from another room. Must be in the sunroom, his favorite room in the house. Getting all that predawn sun in.

"I'm–" fine, is what I was going to say, but I can already hear his slippers clopping their way over here, so I don't waste my breath. I sigh, pressing my hands against my eyelids.

Kaito stops dead in the entrance to the living room. "Harumaki." He says it like a curse. I don't want to look at his face and see him worry.

"I'll be fine," I say. I pull my hands down and look at him anyway. It... stings to see him looking upset.

He rushes over to my side, pulling my hands so he can look at them first, then checking my legs. It was just a few drops of holy water spilling there... my hands took the worst of it. Real moron move. Guess I didn't learn anything at vampire school.

"What happened?" he asks, in a murmur.

I shrug. "Vampire hunters. Three of them. They were waiting for me."

"And you... got away from them?" His eyes stray from me up to the door. I didn't lock back up when I got in, but that deadbolt's there for a reason.

"I kicked their asses," I explain, "but you should lock it anyway. Don't think I got followed, but maybe they had backup."

Kaito nods. He whispers an apology to me (for some reason) before pulling away and standing to lock the door. Then he's back down with me again. He reaches for my cheek, thumbing across a wound and smearing old blood across my face.

"It... looks worse than it is," I say. I try to look away from his hand, at anything else.

Kaito sighs. "Think it looks just as bad as it is," he murmurs, pulling his hand back. "Do you need help?"

"Just to the couch is fine." Any room will do. The only room we don't keep shaded is the sunroom, which is why Kaito (known sun lover) spends time in there.

Kaito inspects me briefly before he lifts me up in his arms. It's not good that he does, because it puts me *really* close to his chest, where his heart is pumping *so* much blood through his body. His heart rate is elevated right now. I guess he really is stressed out about all this.

I shut my eyes tight and try to block out the feeling of Kaito's heart beating. It doesn't work, but it only needs to not be a catastrophe for thirty seconds. He sets me down on one of the cushions and eases me to rest. I pick my head up and try to adjust my hair, but he gets to it first, carefully getting it out of the way.

"That any better?" Kaito asks. He kneels next to me, a smile on his face. It's fake. He wants me not to worry about how much he's worrying.

I close my eyes again and sigh. "Yeah, it's fine."

"Is there..." Kaito hesitates. "...There anything else I can do? Guess you don't need tea. Would medicine help?"

I shake my head. "The only thing that can help now is blood. I missed my window to feed. So I'll have to go out there tomorrow."

"You're going back out there!?" Kaito almost shouts. I open my eyes back up, unfortunately catching the horror in his face. "Harumaki, come on. Not looking like that. There's got to be something else you can do."

"That's the thing with being a vampire, Kaito. I don't have a choice. I'll be careful. But I need more blood."

Kaito frowns. "Yeah, but..." he stops, his eyes lighting up. Bad sign. "Wait, hold on! I know what you can do!"

My brows furrow. "This had better not be what I think it is."

"Listen. You need blood. *I'm* blood." Kaito gestures at himself with his hand. "And you know I'd give more than that for you, any time!"

I scowl at him. "I'm not drinking your blood."

I don't want to do that. To be that. Maybe I *do* have to hurt people to survive now. But I don't have to let it be people I care about. If that means I have to do something riskier, that's fine. I don't care.

"Harumaki, come on." This guy has the nerve to pout about this. "If you don't drink any blood, are you just gonna lay here all day and feel bad?"

"That's the plan," I deadpan. "Maybe I'll switch it up and lay in bed all day instead."

Kaito sighs. "Well, at least that way I could lay there with you..."

I shake my head. "You can't be that close to me. I'll get thirsty."

Kaito's expression brightens, and for a moment, he looks like the sun. It burns me up inside.

"So you *do* want to drink my blood," he says, like that somehow means he's won the argument.

I roll my eyes. "You have blood. So yes."

"Hey, c'mon..." Kaito whines, like a kid who wants to stay up past his bedtime, and not like someone fighting me so I'll drain them dry. "I take good care of it! I stay healthy! I'm Type O! Universal donor! That makes it taste better, right?"

"How should I know!?" I sputter.

"Well, it's not like *I* know!" Kaito shouts, throwing his hands in the air.

I bring my hands up and scrub them up and down my face. It hurts, but whatever. "Kaito. I don't want to hurt you."

Kaito sighs. "Well, that's silly. It's my job to support you, as your hero *and* your boyfriend. If all it takes is a little blood... You know how much of that is getting disposed of in my liver, all uselessly? A lot! I donate blood, it can't be *that* different! And even if it was..." he chuckles. "Well, that'd be okay too."

I pull my hands down to give him a look. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

When my hands come down, Kaito grabs one and clasps it. "Means I'm ready to do anything to help you, Harumaki. Anything."

I scowl at him. He's not going to let this go, is he? Even if I don't care if I put myself in danger... I guess he does. If I was in his place, I'd feel the same way.

"Fine." My shoulders slump. "If you're so insistent on getting bitten, whatever. I won't get you to let go of it anyway."

"You sure won't!" He's grinning like a kid in a candy store.

His smile is too bright... radiant. I look away, because thinking about why he's happy makes me nauseous. I don't want to do this. I need to, he's not wrong. But I hate this.

He sucks in a breath, louder than usual, and I look back at him. "Okay. So... What do you need me to do, Harumaki?"

I lift my head and shoulders to make this easier. "Bring your neck down. It's only gonna hurt for a second. Your body will start to relax. I'll keep you from falling over. You might pass out afterwards... At the very least, you'll be woozy. It'll be worse than drawing blood."

"Got it. Okay." Kaito nods. "Do I need to like, clean my neck or somethin'?"

I groan. "Just bring it down. I want to get this over with."

Kaito's neck comes down, close to my mouth. Very close. I lick my lips before I even realize what I'm doing. It takes every bit of self-restraint not to lunge at him like a wild animal. I like to pretend I'm better than this. That the hunger is some kind of chore I have to deal with. But... it's not true. I *want* this. I've wanted this since the first time I met Kaito. And that sickens me to my core.

I take a breath – useless. Just trying to keep focused. I can't slip up and drain too much. Not here, not with him. I reach out and put a hand on each shoulder. It stings, but I barely notice. I try to keep thinking, keep myself from turning into some slobbering mess.

"I'm going to count to three," I hear myself say. My eyes don't leave his neck. They don't blink.

"Got it." I feel his Adam's Apple move. I hear his pulse. It's quick again, too quick. I can already imagine how it feels against my lips. "Go any time."

"One."

I have to do this.

"Two."

I need to do this.

"Three."

God, I want this.

My head lurches forward, biting into his neck, feeling his warmth against me first. Then I taste it. *Oh*, it's good. It's *so* good, everything else seems to fall away. He wasn't wrong. He

might have the best blood I've ever tasted. I feel strength coming back to me with every drop. My hands grip more confidently, and it doesn't hurt at all. The pain in my legs is a distant memory.

It's rich, earthy. Blood always has a thrill in the taste, but the worst blood feels like a chore. Blood bags especially. I could drink this every day for the rest of my life and never get tired. It's like I can *feel* his pulse in me. For a second – one second – I really, truly feel alive.

His breath comes in ragged. Whose? Does it matter?

Kaito.

I start, lurching away from his neck. He goes limp, leaning forwards. He all but falls into me. I sit up and ease him into the seat next to me. His eyes flutter. They're glassy and unfocused.

Shit. Shit, how much did I drink? It must've been... the injury. I'm not used to *needing* blood that badly. Or maybe it was how long it's been since I drank. Or... maybe I'm just not as good at this as I thought.

Doesn't matter, does it? I messed up.

"It'll be okay." I murmur into Kaito's ear. I stand up and lay him down. When I pull my hand from his back, he reaches out and grabs my wrist. At least his grip is still strong.

Kaito's eyes focus on me. "Hey. Don't leave me. Please."

"I won't," I promise. I kneel down. Now we're in opposite situations, aren't we? This didn't help at all.

"Hey. Hey, don't frown like that." Kaito's other hand reaches for my face. He misses, but he manages the second time. His hand is cold. "Look at how red and rosy your cheeks are."

"What about them?" I feel warmth in my cheeks. Blood. *His* blood. This damn man.

"They're pretty," Kaito says. "You're pretty. Anybody ever tell you that?"

Would he just quit? I'm talking before I can think. "There was this annoying guy who kept asking me to drink his blood. He did."

"Who?" Kaito's expression turns serious. Does he *actually* not realize?

...Oh, right. He just lost a lot of blood. "You."

"Oh. Okay." And just like that, he's smiling again. "That's good. I didn't want some other guy wanting you to drink his blood anyway. Kinda weird."

"I thought that too," I say, with what patience I can manage. I feel bad, so that helps.

Kaito keeps rambling. "The only person who should want you to drink their blood is me. I mean, I guess maybe if you found someone else you liked I'd be... okay with it. But it feels special that way. Like I'm important."

I shouldn't be hearing this.

"You're... you're important anyway," I stumble through the words. "You don't have to give me blood for that, Kaito."

His hand brushes against my cheek. "Wanted to, though. Never wanna see you in pain ever again. I got so damn worried when I woke up and you weren't home." He's starting to tear up. "I think about it a lot. If... if something happened to you, I couldn't even find a body."

I frown. "Well, it..."

...I don't really have a good argument. Back when things were worse, I used to think about it. At least I wouldn't leave anything behind but dust. Now, though... there's Kaito. I can't afford to treat my life – my death – casually anymore.

My free hand runs through my hair. There's nothing I can say.

"I just want you to be safe," Kaito insists. "I know one person ain't enough for you to feed on, and that's fine. But... I still want you to be able to drink my blood sometimes, if it'll keep you safe. Even if it tastes nasty and gross..."

I blink at him in confusion. Nothing changes. He looks like some sopping wet cartoon dog. I just – have to take a second, since what he said is *so* far from true.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask. "Your blood is the best I've ever had."

His reaction is immediate. He sniffles. His eyes get wide and shiny. Tears fall down his face. "It is?"

"Why is that a surprise!?" I snap. "You were so busy talking your blood up just a minute ago!"

"Yeah, but I thought..." Kaito stops to sniffle again. He looks miserable, but he's smiling. "I thought you were just bein' polite about how my blood was. That you didn't wanna drink from me because it smelled really bad."

My shoulders slump. "I didn't want to bite you and drink from you and turn you into a sobbing mess!"

"Aw... you were worried about me." Kaito smiles, one of his ugly, goopy ones that turn my insides to knots. "Well, don't be, 'cuz it makes me really, really, *really really* happy to hear that you like my blood. So much that I'm gonna be a real pest next time I feel good enough for you to drink from me."

It looks wrong, for him to be smiling all sunny like that when tears are running down his face. So I reach with one of my hands and brush them away. He smiles even more, then, and it stings.

"I'm not drinking from you again," I insist. "I don't want to hurt you, Kaito."

"You didn't hurt me, Harumaki," Kaito murmurs. "It was just a pinch for a second. And now I feel... kinda light. And more in love with you than ever."

"Shut *up*."

Kaito chuckles. "I'm just sayin' how I feel. I'll be happier if you're safer, even if it's just a day or two a month. Besides! What kinda boyfriend can't give a little bit of blood when his girlfriend needs it?"

I glare at him. "You're insane."

"Never been saner," Kaito says, grinning like a kid on Christmas. "C'mere. Bring your face close."

I was afraid I'd get urges if I got near him. But when I pull in closer, I'm not thirsty at all. It feels... nice. Peaceful.

Kaito kisses me. It's not totally a surprise, but it's enough of one that my eyes widen before I close them. My hand moves back to support his head, keep him from dropping. My lips taste like blood, but Kaito doesn't seem to care. He's still warm to touch, and it's comforting, being here with him. It's not the desperate feeling of *need* I had drinking his blood, but it shouldn't be.

It's just home.

I release him and gently lower him back down. "I'll think about it, but I'm serious that I don't want to drink your blood."

"I respect that you've got principles and standards about it," Kaito says. "But... Harumaki, listen. I liked you drinking my blood, okay?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Yeah. Could've guessed that."

"Just tell me you'll let me give you the pitch when I'm feeling better."

He's so damn persistent. And... as much as those 'principles and standards' object, I've got to admit it, even sitting here full. Kaito's blood... tastes *really* damn good.

I swallow. "...Okay." With that, I pull back. "But... you really need something to eat, so you can get your blood back."

Kaito pouts, but at the same time, he looks expectant. "...Does that mean you're gonna cook for me?"

I shrug. "Sure. It's been a while, but I know how."

"I know you do." His pout is replaced by another bubbly smile. "Okay. I'll let you go. But I'm gonna bug you the whole time to make sure you're still here."

"Where would I go?" I ask as I stand. Hopefully we've got fish or something for iron.

"You never know what could happen," Kaito says. He sounds too serious, given the moment.

"What happens is I make you breakfast."

And I do just that. As much of a baby as he is that morning, he ends up recovering pretty quickly. That part makes me feel better, takes the sting out of the guilt. It still feels wrong, the thought of relying on him for something like his blood. But... he really does just seem so damn *happy* to give it. I don't know if I'll ever feel *comfortable* with the idea. But if he wants so badly to help me... I don't have the heart to tell him no.

They'll never make another man like Momota Kaito. And that's good... Because just one is as much sunshine as I can handle without turning to ash.

Symbiosis

Story by Emi

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

The room was empty for the first time in a while. Himiko could stare up at the ceiling and hear nothing but the sound of her own ragged breathing, see nothing but the elaborate lighting fixture, metal curlicues framing the lamp itself. It was off at the moment; the natural early morning light was more than enough to illuminate her cowering alone on her bed. When the lady of the house had left her, one of the very first things she did was haul herself to her feet and stagger over to pull the curtains open and get some of that elusive sunlight.

Below her second-story window was a gorgeous garden, complete with a hedge maze and benches to lounge on amongst the flowers. A couple of times since her capture, she'd tried to peek out at night, curious if the vampires might enjoy the majesty of that garden under the moonlight rather than the sun. All of once she'd gotten a glimpse of a figure walking around below. Her roommate, whose name she couldn't recall, was terrified that any little thing might get them in trouble, so Himiko too had been forced to lapse into frightened complacency, confined to her slice of the Shinguuji estate.

Sister, as she'd asked to be called, hauled her roommate away after drinking her fill from Himiko. She had a feeling she wouldn't be seeing her again. It was laughable though to think Himiko was the type to mount a daring rescue. She stared up at the ceiling and kept a hand clamped to the fever-hot side of her neck, pulse pounding against her fingers. It felt damp, so she shifted her grip a little, sliding her fingertips up and down to try discerning whether it was blood or merely sweat.

"What am I going to do?" she asked the empty room around her. "Am I just going to be stuck here until I die?"

Why was this happening to her? Kidnapped by a vampire as a food source? She was just a regular girl with the misfortune of being out too late one night. Tears began to sting the corners of her eyes, so she squeezed them shut, unwilling to face the humiliation of watching her vision blur and knowing that even her emotions, one of the few things that still belonged to her, weren't truly under her own control.

The door creaked, swinging open to admit the less fearsome of her captors. Himiko wiped angrily at her eyes before she looked over, trying to ensure her face was dry when met with Shinguuji Korekiyo standing still and silent by the foot of her bed.

"I've brought your meal," they said finally, after she'd spent a few moments staring them

down. “Iron-rich food to replenish blood cells.” Himiko watched them cross to the desk in the corner and set her plate there, along with a glass of some greenish sludge that she supposed was meant to be some kind of nutritional smoothie. Gross.

“Why?” she asked after another tense moment of quiet. She was still afraid to remove her hand from her neck, and the clear amber of Korekiyo’s eyes pierced exactly that spot, like they could see through to the bite mark below. *Could* they? No, definitely not, right? X-ray vision wasn’t a vampiric ability. “What difference does it make to you whether I eat well? Your sister is just going to drain me dry sooner or later anyway, isn’t she?”

“Supposing that’s the case, haven’t you just answered your own question, Yumeno-san? Naturally we would be interested in maximizing your usefulness, and part of that is allowing you to replenish your blood supply enough to remain alive and in acceptable health for as long as possible.” A soft noise followed, maybe a laugh deliberately muffled behind the face mask they wore. They’d never lowered it in her presence, but she knew what she would see if they did, the same scarlet lips and deadly white fangs as Sister.

“Like livestock,” she mumbled. It made a sickening amount of sense.

“Indeed. But that is not my motivation, even if it may well be my sister’s.” They hadn’t taken their eyes off her neck since first setting her dinner down, and at those words, they began advancing to where she sat on the bed, a hand outstretched. “Are you still bleeding? Allow me to take a look.”

It turned out to be the kind of request for permission that was only a formality, because they peeled her fingers away from her carotid themself, hand icy cold in her own. They held it longer than they needed to, clasping it tight while they inspected her neck and prodded gently at it with their opposite hand.

“No,” Korekiyo said in answer to a question she hadn’t asked. “You’re alright. The wound closed up just fine. It’ll leave a nasty bruise, but nothing more.” Under their breath, they added something that sounded like “never did learn anything resembling delicacy.” Her clammy, trembling hand was given another firm squeeze, then they let go and took a step back to survey her more fully. “I understand you have no reason to trust a vampire, particularly one who got you in your current predicament, but I don’t agree with Sister on everything.”

“What does that mean? You’re going to help me get out of this place? Yeah, right.” Himiko scoffed. It was too good to be true. Annoyance bubbled up within her. She wanted Korekiyo gone. Maybe they were waiting to ensure she would actually eat? The smoothie stared at her from its place on the desk, alongside what seemed to be steak, vegetables, and mashed potatoes. She got up and crossed the room under their watchful gaze, sitting down in front of her meal.

“Perhaps eventually,” Korekiyo hedged. Himiko picked up her fork and knife. She carved off a tiny bit of steak and stared at the meat for a long moment. Practically still bloody, more rare than she liked. “For the time being, however, I could get you much better treatment by saying I’d like to claim you for myself. I have no fondness for torturing my meals. Not when they don’t enjoy it.”

It was tempting to ask who would ever enjoy getting fed on by a vampire, the sharp sting of fangs puncturing delicate skin, but that wasn’t the most important thing. She mustered up another couple bites of food while considering what to say, glancing over her shoulder at Korekiyo so she didn’t need to look too closely at how red her steak was.

“What’s special about me? Why not offer this arrangement to everyone if it’s so simple?”

“It would be impossible to take *everyone* for myself,” they replied patiently, as if speaking to a child. “That would only lead to going hunting again for Sister. She requires sustenance too, and will get it however she must. But to answer what I assume the intent of your question is… there’s nothing particularly special about you. You interest me, I suppose. I heard you’re a magician, and I’ve not had the pleasure of watching a magic show in many years. But you are not the only mortal to whom I’ve offered a way out. Many decline for one reason or another. Mostly distrust, I imagine. Their choices are their own, but I never offer a second time.”

“What’s the catch? I just don’t understand.”

“There is no catch.” They’d begun pacing the room as they spoke. It kept her mesmerized as she ate with one eye on them, watching the glossy waterfall of their hair, the elegant austerity of movement. “You may understand me in time, you may not. You will have time for that if you accept.”

“…Can’t I think about it? Or learn more about you or something?”

“Of course. Of course. How about this? You finish the meal I’ve so graciously prepared for you, and I’ll return with a soothing ointment for your neck? Something to ease any lingering pain from the bite. Consider it a peace offering if you like. A gesture of my good intentions.”

“Okay,” Himiko breathed between sips of earthy green glop. When they swept out of the room, passing sightlessly by the mirror, only the lingering scent of sandalwood and vanilla remained.

OPEN UP! I KNOW YOU HAVE HER IN THERE!

CREAK

YOU DARE TO DISTURB THE PEACE OF THE OVERLORD OF ICE?!

I'M HERE TO SAVE THE BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS FROM YOUR EVIL CLUTCHES!

YOU SPEAK OF THE DARK LADY? SHE DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU.

SHE DOESN'T BELONG TO YOU EITHER! NOW TELL ME WHERE SHE IS OR I'LL STAKE YOU AND FIND HER MYSELF!

YOU LITTLE FIEND-

STOP!

HE IS NOT THE VAMPIRE!

YOU ARE MISTAKEN. LEAVE HIM ALONE!

PRINCESS SONIA! HE HASN'T HURT YOU HAS HE?

LORD GUNDHAM WOULD NEVER HURT ME.

COME HERE MY LOVE.

NOW...

YOU WILL CEASE YOUR PATHETIC ATTEMPT TO INTERRUPT OUR HAPPINESS.

LEAVE AND DO NOT RETURN.

O-OKAY.

GOOD.

END.

A Rock and a Hard Place

Story by ToxicPinapple | Spot Art by Nia

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Amami is awake when Kirumi finally returns to their hotel room. She isn't expecting them to be; with their new sleep schedule, they should be regaining consciousness around dusk, when the sun has begun to dip below the horizon. Instead, it's midday, the sun blazing high in the middle of the sky, and Amami is fully conscious, seated at the desk under the window with their fingers laced together across the table. They twist the ring on their left index finger. The curtains are shut to keep the sun out on Kirumi's suggestion, to prevent headaches and nausea. But if Amami was really taking that seriously, they wouldn't be awake.

Shifting her weight, Kirumi lowers the day pack she took with her to the floor and toes out of her boots. "Did something happen?"

"Not really," Amami says mildly. Their eyes flit in her direction, then stay there. Vampirism has changed them in a few subtle ways. Kirumi's only noticed because she was so familiar with the face beforehand. Their eyes, previously a vibrant, emerald green, are desaturated now, like Kirumi physically drew the pigment out of them when she sunk her teeth into their neck. Their curls, on the other hand, are more or less the same colour as they used to be.

The change to Amami's skin tone was the most subtle. Kirumi wasn't sure what to expect. Prior to her transformation, she would get flushed in the cold and burn under the sun. Now, her cheeks more or less maintain the same ivory tone, albeit with exceptions for when she's fed recently. Amami kept their rich, dark skin colour, but lost the warmth that Kirumi was so familiar with. As they fidget with their ring, Kirumi watches them press down with one index finger, then lift it again. Even on the lighter underside of their palm, Amami's skin doesn't change tone. They no longer have the blood to chase away.

Kirumi swallows and looks away. Amami is still gazing at her. They don't look angry, but they never do. They're mild-mannered, even under the circumstances. Kirumi certainly wouldn't be able to blame them if they'd gotten mad at her. Tugging at her skirt, Kirumi searches for an excuse, but now that Amami knows about her condition, they know as well that she doesn't need to use the bathroom, and *wouldn't* be going to bed for another few hours, having taken the equivalent of the night shift for their search…

So they're at a stalemate. And finally, Amami breaks the silence by adding, "I just realised this was the only way I was going to be able to talk to you. Did I do something wrong, Toujou-san?"

"What?"

Kirumi tries not to make a habit of speaking out of turn, but the word is pulled from her before she can think better of it. She studies Amami's expression for any traces of irony, but finds none. They're frowning at her, a crease in their brow, and—no, no, no, that won't do at all.

"Not even remotely," Kirumi says. "I cannot imagine what would have led you to that conclusion."

"You've been avoiding me," Amami points out, and Kirumi opens and shuts her mouth. Yes, she has. But not on their account. She swallows, trying to find the words to dissuade their concern, but Amami continues before she can: "I didn't want to—I don't want to lean on you too much, Toujou-san. I know that I did before, and I know that I—already owe you my life, so you'd have every right to leave and I wouldn't resent you, but I—"

"Have I given the impression that I wanted to leave?"

No good. Kirumi can't remember the last time she fed. She's wearing layers of black and a wide-brimmed hat, but so much time out in the sunshine has still left her feeling faint. She sets a gloved hand on one of the bedposts, then hurriedly removes it when Amami gets to their feet. Open concern is written across their face. They look like they want to reach out for her, but they don't, and Kirumi ought to be relieved, but instead her gut twists with something far too close to the desperation she felt three weeks ago when they were bleeding, and—

"No," Amami says, voice hushed. "Not—but I don't know what else I'm supposed to think. I miss you."

Kirumi breathes out. It's habit, nothing more. Neither of them need to breathe any more. Amami will live—for years, for decades, for centuries, and their appearance won't change. Their nails won't grow. They will no longer sweat. They'll hunger for blood, and in its absence, they will grow weak… but they will not starve. Only a cross to the heart or a belly full of garlic will kill them. If they find Amami's sisters, scattered across the world as they

are, Amami will outlive them. They'll watch each of them die. They'll attend their funerals, one after another.

And all the while, Amami will have two choices: suffer, or inflict suffering. This is the existence of a vampire. The existence that Kirumi cursed them to, out of selfishness.

She sinks down to sit on the bed. Amami makes an aborted motion, then abruptly sits back down at the table.

"Let me try again," Amami says in a strangled voice. "What's going on, Toujou-san?"

It's not an unreasonable question. The only problem is that Amami is as kind as they are shrewd. If Kirumi brushes them off with a lie, they'll know, and they might assume they're at fault. But if she tells them the truth…

"I only assumed," Kirumi murmurs, "that it would be best if I kept my distance from you now… after what I have done to you."

Amami blinks at her. They are bright and intelligent, oftentimes perceptive enough to guess what Kirumi is going to say before she can say it, but in this instant they can only utter: "You mean after you… saved my life?"

"It—" Kirumi pinches the bridge of her nose. "Yes, by technicality, you would have—yes. You are alive, and you would not have been, had I not intervened. But it was selfishness that pushed me to make that decision. I merely—"

Amami had warned her before she joined them on their search, that what they were doing was dangerous. Kirumi believed them, but perhaps she didn't grasp the gravity of it. The gravity of what Amami was willing to *do*, to bring each of their sisters home. When Amami was in her arms, shuddering and cold, a bullet lodged between their ribs—well, Kirumi understood it then. And she *acted*. It was the first time in ages that she ever did anything without thinking, pure instinct driving her forward, pure desperation not to lose the first person she wanted in however many—

But she should have thought it through. Should have considered—that Amami, in their kindhearted, gentle nature—that this *curse* Kirumi bears—

"I did not act with your best interests in mind," Kirumi whispers. "You would have every right to be angry at me for that."

Amami pouts at her. "You say that, but I don't know what you *should* have done, in that case," they comment, scratching their nose. "I was going to die, Toujou-san. I'd rather be a vampire than dead."

Do they mean that? They must. Amami, like Kirumi, lives ruled by obligation. They have twelve sisters to find. Kirumi would have continued the search in their absence, but this alternative is doubtlessly preferable, given that Amami would have no way of guaranteeing that Kirumi would be *successful* in her aims, should they have died there. (Though she would have seen it through. Amami is that important to her, and even if they weren't… Kirumi doesn't break her promises.)

She tugs at her skirt. She still can't bring herself to meet their eyes, and against Amami's actual reasoning, Kirumi is finding her own reticence difficult to justify. It's just—this affliction—this *curse*—to live by taking, by causing pain, by—

"If I could offer you my blood," Kirumi chokes out, "then perhaps—"

"Hey, hey," Amami lifts their hands, palms up, in a placating gesture. "Come on. It's sweet of you to say that, but there's no point thinking about it, is there? Besides, I know that already."

Kirumi deflates. She puts her head in her hand and mumbles, "Do you?"

"Yes." Amami stands. Kirumi listens to their chair scrape the carpeted floor, then the soft padding of their footsteps. They must be walking audibly on purpose, so as not to startle her, not that Amami ever could. The mattress dips, creaks beneath their weight, and then Amami's fingertips hook over her wrist. They're warm in Kirumi's memories, but cool now, just as cold as Kirumi's own. Amami doesn't hesitate, though, to tug her hand away from her face and interlock their fingers.

At this proximity, Kirumi is forced to meet their eyes. Their pale green eyes. The colour has changed, but they still belong to the same individual; still brimming with warmth as they focus on her, the pupils drawn into slits but nonetheless dilated, crinkling at the edges with a sweet, lopsided smile. The imperfect, genuine smile that Amami saves for only her, the one that makes them look a little younger, a little closer to the teenager that they actually are. That lessens the weight of the entire world at their shoulders.

"I do know," Amami murmurs. "I always have. Not in as many words. I mean, it's not like you were very forthcoming about your diet or anything." Their grin splits into something wry. "But yeah, Toujou-san, I know what you'd do for me. You're the most selfless person I've ever met. And if your reason for bringing me back to life back then was *selfish*, because you wanted me to be alive…"

Amami pauses. Kirumi waits, but they don't continue right away, dark lashes fluttering in front of their pale eyes. Then, Amami closes the small distance between them, allowing the slightest brush of their lips.

"Then good," Amami says finally, their nose close enough to bump Kirumi's cheek. "You deserve selfish."

"You're talking about your life, Amami-san," Kirumi murmurs, swallowing the butterflies that have filled her chest at the touch, though it isn't the first time Amami has ever kissed her. "It's hardly akin to taking the last pastry at a banquet."

“As if you’d do that either.” Amami grins. “But it works out for both of us, don’t you think? I don’t want to be dead, you don’t want me to be dead. They call that mutually beneficial. And, I get to spend the rest of my life with you. In like, a big way. I’m having a hard time being that upset about it.”

Kirumi deflates. At the same time, it’s like all the tension is pulled from her joints at once, and she allows her head to fall against Amami’s shoulder. They have a way of talking her around like that, making everything sound so simple. But it’s nowhere near *close*. Amami will understand with time, the weight of the burden that she’s placed upon them, the *shame* that comes out of living this way… Even if there is too much else at play for them to get it now.

“Nonetheless,” Kirumi murmurs, “I have permanently altered your quality of life. I have… inflicted you with what I considered my greatest secret.”

“You know how you could make up for that?” Amami’s fingers trail along Kirumi’s biceps. Their hands rest against her shoulder blades, light enough that she could shake them off, but she doesn’t. “Have you thought about not burning the candle from both ends? Having us search *together* again? Wasn’t that the original idea?”

Of course, that is what Kirumi would do if she wasn’t a coward. But she—

“I need you right now, Kirumi,” Amami adds, in a lower voice. “More than ever. You’re the only one who can help me with this.”

…It’s not so dissimilar from what they said the last time Kirumi attempted to pull back. With another habitual sigh, she lifts her head, giving Amami an unimpressed look. They’re smiling at her, apologetic, but not so apologetic as to withdraw the statement. Kirumi supposes she wouldn’t expect them to anyway.

“For the eldest,” Kirumi says wryly, “you do have a way with words.”

“I’m desperate,” Amami admits. “I was going to bring out the crocodile tears next.”

Kirumi stifles a laugh. She shouldn’t reward Amami being bratty, but she likes it, is the thing. It’s a side of them she only sees when they’re alone—and she’ll admit it, she’s missed it over the past several weeks. She’s missed *them*, because as much as Kirumi has been able to convince herself that the distance was for their own sake, Amami is still the most important person in the world to her… There is nobody else she would have even begun to consider turning. Feeding on their blood while they were dying never even occurred to her, for how hungry she was at the time. She just didn’t want to lose them.

She puts her arms around them. “I am sorry to have left you in the lurch. This is… difficult for me too.”

“I know,” Amami murmurs; always so sweet to her. Their hands come to rest at her waist. “I don’t mind riding it out with you, as long as you let me.”

“As long as, mm?” Kirumi supposes that’s fair. She shuts her eyes and leans into them, breathes in. They smell faintly of iron now, but their aftershave, the sweet evergreen scent, remains. A bit of familiarity, despite how much Amami has changed thanks to her intervention. Regardless of their new dietary restrictions, Amami Rantaro is still Amami Rantaro. Even at her worst, Kirumi doubts that she could change that.

Shifting her head, Kirumi presses a kiss against their cheek. Then she settles into them. She’s tired, and she’ll admit it if prompted, but Amami doesn’t seem to be going for that. They seem more or less content to stay this way, and Kirumi will be happy to do that. The sun won’t be setting for a while yet, after all; they have several hours left to waste away resting in here.

Before that, though…

“I really am… sorry, Rantaro,” Kirumi murmurs. “I never… wanted any of this. I would have shielded you from it if I could have.”

“I know,” Amami responds at once. Their hands lace together at the small of her back. “But I’m glad that I know. I hope you’ll let me help you with it too, now that I’m here.”

Kirumi couldn’t even begin to think of asking for that. Not from anybody, but not from Amami in particular, who has already given so much.

…It does mean a lot, though, that they would offer.

One of these days, months from now if not years from now, Kirumi hopes that she will be good enough to them, a valuable enough asset, a loyal enough friend, that she will begin to deserve that kindness.

Parasite, Parasocial

Story by Kalcifer | Spot Art by Emmy

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

All things considered, Hope's Peak has been better than Sayaka expected. She would have stuck it out either way, of course - after everything she's done, she'd damn well find ways to fake her way through school if it guaranteed the group's success - but it turns out she's not the only vampire to pass through these unhallowed halls. She's not even the only vampire here *now*.

And that's fine, of course. She'd be a hypocrite to let it bother her. As long as they aren't actively preying on her classmates or attracting negative press for vampires as a whole, she really shouldn't care.

She wouldn't care, she thinks, if it weren't for one of her senpai in particular. As far as she can tell, they don't have a legitimate talent. They're just coasting on their vampiric powers.

There's a part of Sayaka that respects that. You do whatever it takes to succeed, because it's better than the alternative.

Unfortunately, their "whatever it takes" has just cut into hers. Because Sayaka may not be out of the coffin yet, but she knows she's been getting lucky. Sooner or later, the press is going to find out, and when they do, she needs to make sure there isn't a hint of impropriety attached to the revelation.

(She's taken care to make sure that her own improper actions will never be linked to her, thank you. Those ex-idols whose tour had been stealing Sayaka's ticket sales certainly weren't in a position to snitch.)

The point is: something has to give, and it isn't going to be Sayaka. It's time for the Ultimate Imposter to prove just how good they are at meeting expectations.

She sneaks up behind them in the hallway, but though they jump when she grabs their shoulder, their glamour doesn't even ripple. They're disguised as Togami again this month. It seems to be one of their favorites, though Sayaka can't imagine why.

She's good at playing along, though, so she greets them with a bright smile and a "Togami-kun! Do you have a minute?"

She'll give them credit for this much: the Imposter rolls their eyes exactly the same way as the real Togami. "Fine, but make it quick. What do you want?"

Sayaka weighs the emptiness of the hallway against her desire not to drag this conversation out. It's not a hard call; she trusts her ability to either charm or threaten any eavesdroppers into silence. "I was just wondering... I don't mean to pry, but you're a vampire, right?"

The Imposter crosses their arms. "So are you. What's your point?"

"Nothing, really," Sayaka says. She doesn't go so far as to bat her eyelashes, but she's as close as she thinks they'll let her get away with. "But that must make things so much easier for you, right? With the impersonation, I mean."

The Imposter snorts. They seem more amused than angry, which is interesting. "Sure," they say. "Just like you're feeding off your audiences' emotions. We're using the abilities we have in ways that benefit us. That's what Hope's Peak is for."

"It's not the same," Sayaka says. (Snaps? No, her self control is too good for that. She'd never.) "My shows are real. I give them what they want, and if I take a little bit for myself, I think I've earned that much. It's a mutually beneficial relationship."

"I'm sure it's nice to tell yourself that." The blandness of their tone is more infuriating than any condescension the real Togami could muster.

Sayaka leans in, voice soft and gentle as a blindfold. "Listen," she says. "I've worked hard to get to where I am. Your cheap tricks wouldn't get you anywhere in an industry like mine. It takes effort, and connections, and blood."

The Imposter barks a laugh. They look as surprised by it as Sayaka. "I'm sorry," they say, "is this really about professional pride? That's adorable."

Sayaka bites back a snarl. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not trying to insult you," the Imposter says, sounding very insulting. "I think it's sweet that you've found a way to feed that makes everyone love you. I'm happy for you." Their eyes go flat, deep and dark and utterly inhuman. "Not everyone gets that chance. Some of us are monsters, and our choices are hurting people or starving to death."

It's a good performance, Sayaka supposes, albeit one that's wasted on her. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"You don't?" The Imposter raises an eyebrow. "You haven't heard that graduating from Hope's Peak means guaranteed success for the rest of your life?" Their mouth twists, acknowledging the irony.

Sayaka looks away. This, at least, she understands perfectly.

The Imposter sighs. "I want a future that's more than hiding in the shadows and attacking the most vulnerable. I refuse to apologize for that."

"Good," Sayaka says. She meets their eyes. "But you're not the only one. I haven't had it as easy as you seem to think."

"Really," the Imposter says flatly.

"Really," Sayaka chirps. "I once had a producer who refused to let me be alone in the studio after I got some threatening letters, only for it to turn out that he was the one who sent them. Turns out he was hoping I'd think of him as a hero and agree to date him."

It turned out the Imposter's disgust looks nothing like Togami's. There's no elegance in the curl of their lip, only sheer distaste. "That's revolting," they say. "Did you at least eat the bastard?"

"It was just terrible when I found him collapsed in one of the practice rooms," Sayaka replies, cheery as ever. "I hear the doctors don't know if he's ever going to wake up."

"Excellent." There's no viciousness in their tone, just the quiet satisfaction of a world set to rights.

Maybe that's what gets Sayaka to admit, "It's actually kind of nice to be able to talk to someone about..." She gestures vaguely. "All of this."

The Imposter raises an eyebrow. "There are other vampires in the school, you know."

"Sure," Sayaka agrees. By Hope's Peak standards, the Imposter is actually one of the subtler vampires. "But most of them are either people whose opinions I care about or people who could cause trouble for me."

It's blunt enough to startle a laugh out of the Imposter. "I see," they say. "You're actually kind of an asshole when you aren't performing."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sayaka says, idol-bright.

The Imposter brings their hand to their mouth, not quite covering their smile. "I can't tell if this says more about you, or about me for finding it funny." They shake their head. "Either way, it's impressive. You're almost as good at putting up a front as I am."

"Almost? I'd like to see you smile your way through an interview with a host who just ate an entire garlic chicken."

The Imposter's posture conveys the impression of looming without actually moving. It is, Sayaka will reluctantly admit, a nice trick. "The next time you call out sick, I will replace you in class, and absolutely no one will notice."

"I'd like to see you try," Sayaka says. She flashes her best media smile, only slightly marred by the fangs peeking through.

"You will," the Imposter says. For just an instant, their glamour flickers, and Sayaka can see their own fanged smile in return.

Toiling With Your Blood (I Remember Something)

Story by Bandit | Spot Art by Kirisstar

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Today.

"Puhuhuhuhuhu.~"

Laughter crackles through Junko's lips. Blood drips from the hole in her chest, and when she barks out a cough, it splatters onto Kyoko's face. "Didn't think you had it in you, Kyokyo. *Murder*...." She strokes her thumb along Kyoko's jaw, smearing her blood across her lips. "It's really not your style."

Kyoko doesn't say anything.

"You should have *bitten* me. Still...." Junko uses her fading strength to drag herself closer, pushing Kyoko's bare hand deeper into her chest. "*I'm proud of you*," she hisses in her ear.

Kyoko brushes her fingers against Junko's cold heart, and her own beats once, hard, in response.

"*Ooooo*," Junko croons. "Rip my heart out and *eat it*, why don't—" She cuts herself off. Her eyes flash gold. "What are you—" She coughs again, then growls, "***What** are you **doing***?"

As Junko tears back, Kyoko thrusts her hand deeper, seizes Junko's heart, and forces her palm flat against it.

"*Killing a monster*."

Three Days Ago.

Junko Enoshima has no soul.

There are no doubts about that.

At least, there are no doubts for Kyoko Kirigiri, who sees in Junko nothing more than the face of her once human friend.

Magazines litter the kotatsu before her, and Kyoko can't help but stare at Junko's face plastered on each one of them. It's harder to tell she's a vampire than Harukawa-san, since Junko covers her blood red eyes with icy blue contacts, but a good hunter can still tell, just from the way her top lip frames hidden fangs – a subtle difference most editors don't fix because most readers won't notice.

Kyoko Kirigiri is not most readers.

After a few minutes, Kyoko crosses her arms and, without looking from the magazines, calls out, "Are you finished yet?"

"*Nyeh*."

"I guessed as much," Kyoko murmurs, running her tongue along one fang. "A soul can be a hard thing to contain."

Three Years Ago.

"My eyes? Oh, they've *always* been this way!" Ryoko brightens, her cheeks flushing a soft pink. "Mukie always said they made me look like a vamp, but that's just a *rumor*, right?" She glances up at the older hunter with them. "The whole red eyes thing?"

"No." Kyoko answers bluntly before her partner, Yui, has a chance to respond. "All vampires have red eyes. But you cannot use that as a distinguishing feature. Too many vampires use contacts to disguise their eye color—"

"*And*," Yui interjects, "a handful of humans get *red* contacts to look more like vampires." An awkward smile traces her lips. "It's kind of alluring – black hair and red eyes. Like Harukawa-san!"

Kyoko presses her lips together as she considers the model taking the world by storm. "Harukawa-san is a vampire, onee-sama."

Yui nudges Kyoko's shoulder. "You don't *know* that, Kirigiri-chan."

"I know."

Ryoko giggles, interrupting them. "You two seem like the *best* of friends! Just like me and my sister!" Her gaze drops as she sobers. "Before she disappeared."

"Stolen by a vampire."

"*Kirigiri-chan, you don't* ***know*** *that*." Yui nudges her again.

But Kyoko keeps staring straight ahead. "I know."

Thirteen Years Ago.

"Otoo-chan!" Kyoko rushes after her papa. She doesn't know how to speak her fear, and she doesn't want her grandpapa to overhear. "When...." She hesitates, running her tongue along one fang. "When will you be back?"

Her papa smiles down at her and ruffles her hair. "Soon, my little bat. Very soon."

Kyoko glances back at her grandpapa, swallows, and nods.

Three Years Ago.

"So you're *my* age, right, Kyokyo?" Ryoko sits next to Kyoko, her pajama pants covered with brightly colored bats, and smiles up at her. "But you're already a vampire hunter! How did *that* happen? Mukie never could, and *I* heard that vampires are—"

Kyoko tunes Ryoko out as she stares across the fire. Most of what she says isn't important. Yui is better at engaging with her, although she also gets tired of her chatter. She's just too kind to tell her to stop.

It's distracting.

Just another reason Ryoko shouldn't be there.

It takes a few minutes before Kyoko notices that something is off. She tunes back in, only to realize that the steady hum of Ryoko's voice has faded away. "Is something wrong?"

"You're not paying attention to me."

"No."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kyoko sees Ryoko's cheeks puffing out in exasperation. She sighs. "Most of what you say is filler, and I need to make sure no other monsters—"

"I can help!" Ryoko exclaims a little too loudly, clenching her hands into excited fists. "I've never *met* a monster, or anything, *but* my sister was *obsessed* with them!" She looks up at the starry sky. "There's not a full moon, so we won't run into any werewolves, *and*—!" She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a bag of sunflower seeds. "I have these for when we run into vampires! You just reach inside and—"

"Don't."

"—throw a handful of seeds on the ground—"

"*Don't*."

"—and vamps have to stop and count *all* of them!" Ryoko scatters a handful of seeds in front of her, then beams at Kyoko. "Mukie was *so good* at knowing all the—" She stops.

Blinks twice. “What are you doing?”

Kyoko refuses to look at the seeds. If she doesn’t look at them, they won’t be there. “Nothing.”

“You’re looking at the seeds.”

“No, I’m not.”

Ryoko stares at her, confused. Then her eyes slowly widen. “Are you *counting* them?”

“No.”

Ryoko gasps. “You *are*, aren’t you?”

Kyoko doesn’t look at the seeds. It takes a *lot* of effort, but she’s succeeding. She cannot imagine how hard – no, *impossible* – this would be if—

“*No*,” she repeats through gritted teeth, fingers clenched into painful fists.

Ryoko starts gathering the scattered seeds. “I’m *so* sorry! I didn’t know you were—” She doesn’t finish the sentence. Her brain catches up to her words, and she looks up at Kyoko with large eyes. “*You’re* a—”

“No,” Kyoko says, meeting Ryoko’s blood red eyes and trying not to think of how her blood must taste. “I’m not.”

Thirteen Years Ago.

“Ojii-san?”

Kyoko kicks her tiny feet against his couch once more and then stills. Her papa has been gone nearly a month. Her mama is sick, and he’s looking for a cure, while her grandpapa keeps an eye on her. It’s confusing. Vampires like her mama aren’t supposed to get sick. Her grandpapa says—

Well.

Kyoko looks over at her grandpapa. He’s filled the silence with more silence. She knows why.

“If vampires are so horrible,” she struggles to say, “and *okaa-chan* is a vampire, then….” She forces the words out. “What does that make me?”

Her grandpapa doesn’t flinch. “An abomination.” His words are solemn, even, uncompromising. “A tool to better hunt those monsters.”

“Like okaa-chan.” Kyoko glances up with large purple eyes, a tinge of red rimming her pupils. “Is okaa-chan a monster, ojii-san?”

Her grandpapa scoffs. “Why do you think she’s sick, child?”

Three Years Ago.

“She shouldn’t be here.”

Kyoko stares at Ryoko, whose head rests in Yui’s lap. Something firm and unhappy stirs in her chest; later, she will know herself well enough to understand that feeling is *jealousy*, but she’s never felt anything like it before and so does not know what to call it now. “She’s human,” she continues, “she knows *nothing*, and she’s liable to get herself killed.”

“*I’m* human,” Yui counters, running her fingers gently through Ryoko’s blood red hair. She doesn’t glance up, doesn’t look across the fire, and doesn’t keep an eye on the fading darkness as the first light creeps into the sky, painting it a dewy, milky grey. “Most hunters are, aren’t they?”

“She’s too young.”

“She’s *your* age!”

Kyoko presses her lips together. It’s *her* watch. Yui should be resting before they set out again, not staying awake with a client who shouldn’t even be here in the first place. “She’s a distraction,” she says, “and she’s nothing like me.”

Yui smiles, a small and gentle thing. “No. Of course, she isn’t. There’s no one quite like you, Kirigiri-chan.” She takes a long, thin stick and prods their fire’s dying flames. “Some of us start young,” she murmurs. “I did, after my sister was turned. No one else wanted to find the vampire responsible, and no one else….” Her eyes grow hard. “No one else wanted to risk looking for *children*.” She tucks strands of hair out of her face, fingers lingering on her single stark strip of white. “Maybe Otonashi-san will become a hunter, too. Taking her with us lets her see what it’s like.”

“Taking her with us will get one of you eaten.” Kyoko sits on the log next to Yui. “Her sister’s already gone.”

“You don’t know that, Kirigiri-chan.”

“I know.”

Silence, filled only by the crackle of the dying flames and Ryoko’s soft snoring.

(There’s drool on Yui’s knee. She doesn’t seem to mind.)

Then Yui gently places a hand on Kyoko’s smaller one. “Have a little hope. We could find Ikusaba-san before the vampires drain her.”

Kyoko’s lips purse together. “I doubt it.”

Still, she turns her hand beneath Yui's and clasps it in hers. Yui's hand is warm. Comforting. Kyoko can feel Yui's heart beating through her skin, the constant thrum of the blood through her veins. She feels something else, too, something much more familiar, but far less comforting – a longing that she *will not* indulge.

"I'm glad you're with me, Yui onee-sama."

"I told you to quit calling me that." Yui presses a gentle kiss to Kyoko's forehead. "And I'm glad you're here, too, Kirigiri-chan."

Thirteen Years Ago.

Kyoko stares down at the gold scar in her slumbering mama's chest, a stake in one hand.

She looks at the stake.

She looks at her mama.

She looks behind her.

Hesitating.

"Ojii-san, are you sure?"

Three Years Ago.

Vampires encircle their little troop. Ryoko's blood red eyes focus on her sister – not dead, as Kyoko hoped, but turned far too young. She's just another form of bait now: a lost child who can ask for help finding her parents, luring in sympathetic and unsuspecting victims.

"Mukie!"

Ryoko doesn't stay with them the way a *smart* individual would. Instead, as the vampires draw near, she throws her handful of seeds into the air, bursts through the few that distracts, and races after her sister.

"Wait!" Yui reaches out, but her fingers barely brush Ryoko's collar before grasping empty air.

Kyoko stakes the first vampire, and it explodes into dust. "Go get her, onee-sama," she says, calm as anything. "I'll take care of these monsters."

Yui hesitates.

"*Go*." Kyoko meets Yui's eyes as scarlet dust taints her lavender hair. "I can take care of myself."

Yui shakes her head. "You could die."

"I won't die." Kyoko shoves Yui away from her. "Now *go!*"

Thirteen Years Ago.

"Kyoko," her papa whispers, not looking at her, his scarred right hand clenching into a fist. "What did you *do*?"

Three Years Ago.

"Yui onee-sama?" Kyoko calls out, racing in the same direction the others disappeared. "Yui onee-sama?"

She *should* call for Ryoko, too, and part of her considers that, twists the thought through her fingertips, then shoves it down. She wishes she had *werewolf* in her heritage instead of vampire; a wolf's sense of smell would help immensely with tracking. Unfortunately, she doesn't, she's alone, and it's getting darker.

As Kyoko starts to call out a third time, she stumbles.

No.

Not stumbles.

Trips over…over *something*.

The something groans.

Some*one*.

Kyoko glances down. She freezes.

"Onee-sama?"

Thirteen Years Ago.

Kyoko hesitates. "I—"

Three Years Ago.

There's not much left of Yui Samidare.

Perhaps that's the point.

Vampires can be cruel when they want. They frequently use their thrall to cause half of a hunting partnership to kill the other while both are unaware, but sometimes, when they want to cause a *different* kind of pain, they do something like this, leaving their victim torn, bloodied, missing limbs, neck pierced as their body bleeds out, as they wait to—

To turn.

Kyoko notices multiple bite marks along what is left of Yui's arms and down both sides of her neck. Her blood gleams in the moonlight. (~~*It calls to her.*~~) She bends down and takes Yui's remaining hand in both of her own. "Yui onee-sama, I—"

Yui's lips curl back, exposing her canines. Not long, not yet. Her human teeth will fall out within the hour, while sharp vampire fangs pierce through her gums. Already her skin is pale, already her hand cold and growing colder, already the thrum of her heartbeat steadily slowing. She lets out a bark of a cough, and blood splatters about her lips.

"I'll find a soul," Kyoko says, squeezing Yui's hand. She's not sure *how* she'll do that, or if it will even work. She only knows that—

"*No*." Yui rips her hand out of Kyoko's and struggles to push herself up. Red already filters into her hazel green eyes – like Christmas, but bloodier. "I don't…."

Kyoko meets her eyes, confused. "Don't what?"

Yui's eyes flicker – green to red and back again – as though she's trying to maintain herself long enough to say what she needs to say before she becomes someone – some*thing* – else. "I'll…I'll *hurt* someone while you…." She coughs again, and it's the same as before, only this time, there's no blood. "You can't bring back everyone I'll kill or give souls to—" She cuts herself off with a third cough, tears pricking her eyes. "*I don't want to be a monster*."

Kyoko flinches.

"*No*, that's not—" Yui stops. Pleads, her voice a thin whine. "*We don't have time*." Then she reaches forward, wraps her hand around one of Kyoko's stakes, and pushes its point against her chest. "Please," she says, trying to force it into Kyoko's hand. "*Please*."

When Kyoko hesitates, Yui gives her one last, gentle nudge.

Kyoko tightens her hand on the stake.

"Save Otonashi-san, if you can," Yui murmurs, closing her eyes. "She didn't ask for—"

Thirteen Years Ago.

Kyoko doesn't look up at her papa. Instead, she stares at the stake in her hand, the dust on her fingertips.

She swallows her heart.

"I killed the monster, otoo-chan."

Her hand hurts.

"*I killed the monster*."

Three Years Ago.

Kyoko dusts herself off as best she can.

Not that it matters, when it comes to a vampire nest.

There will be more, and they will all **die**.

Three Days Ago.

Kyoko raises her palm. In its center rests a golden seed, smaller than the smallest grain of rice, so small that she can barely see it. "It's so *small*."

"*Nyeh*," the mage says, rubbing her eyes. "Souls *are*."

The seed warms Kyoko's hand. No matter how small it is, it bleeds a constant, comforting warmth. She rolls it to the tip of her middle finger and tucks it beneath her fingernail, where she feels it warm against her skin.

This way, she won't lose it.

Today.

The golden fleck like a mustard seed burns in the palm of Kyoko's hand.

It burns as it presses into Junko's heart.

It's not like a fire, not anything like holy, but it burns, it burns, it *burns*, and yet Kyoko

holds her hand still all the same.

The gold flicks around her fingers, up her arms, and it's only then that Junko tears away, eyes flickering as that same golden light burns through her contacts. Junko coughs, sputters, rips at her chest with long, bloodstained nails. "What did you *do*?" she croaks out – a croak that is a yell that is nothing at all as that golden light engulfs her.

Kyoko wonders what it would be like if the fleck was larger. It could kill a person.

(It could kill *her*.)

Someone else might avert their eyes from that bright golden light, but Kyoko doesn't, and for a moment, she's struck blind. Then the light is gone, and standing before her is a girl who looks exactly as she did before Kyoko forced the soul into her, only the hole in her chest has disappeared. Instead, a scar in the shape of an exploding star – etched in gold – remains.

Kyoko stares at the girl but doesn't say anything, just waits.

Her hand hurts.

Just like the first time she staked a vampire.

(Probably because her mama had a soul, too. There was so much her grandpapa refused to understand.)

The girl brushes her hands along her clothes, along her arms, along the new scar like a starburst etched into her chest. She runs her fingers across each stitch and shivers. "What—" Her brow furrows, and she looks up. "Kyokyo?"

And still, Kyoko waits.

"Man, I *really* thought those seeds would work!" Ryoko leans forward and conspiratorially whispers, "Actually, not wanting to count seeds is *super hard*, and it *totally* worked, but only for, like, *five* of them. I don't know how you pull it off, Kyokyo!"

Kyoko tenses. "I'm not a monster," she whispers.

"Oh?" Ryoko runs a hand through her pink hair and winces. "*I* might be." Her head tilts, and she turns to Kyoko, confused. "Wait, don't you mean *vampire?*"

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's—"

Kyoko reaches into her pocket and throws a handful of sunflower seeds into the air.

Ryoko screws her eyes shut. "If I don't look at them, they can't hurt me." Then she cracks one eye open and stares at the seeds. "Or maybe they can't hurt me at all?"

"Welcome back, Ryoko," Kyoko murmurs. She flexes her fingers; they're tingly and numb, but that will fade. (It will come back, too. Like her papa's did.) Scars twist around her right hand and up her wrist, etched in the same gold as Ryoko's starburst. She ignores this. "Let's go."

"But I...." Ryoko blinks twice. "I got Yui-chan *killed*."

"Which means now it's *your* job to help me." Kyoko clears her throat and looks away. "If you want."

Ryoko's head tilts again, and the smile that crosses her lips is more Junko than Ryoko. She nudges Kyoko gently, then takes her right hand in both of hers. "I didn't know vampires could get scars like this," she says, brushing her fingers across them. Her eyes light up. "You know, I could make you some *really cute* gloves to cover it, if you want! Maybe some lace, or—"

Kyoko runs her tongue along her fang, tunes Ryoko out, and smiles.

The Detective & The Vampire

Who Will Win This Battle Of Wits?

Fangs on Film

Story by Keane | Spot Art by Ravensa

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

"What!?" Mahiru jumped up from the park bench, staring down at Peko, aghast.

Peko looked up at her, shocked from her sudden outburst. Her mouth was slightly open in surprise, fangs glinting in the afternoon light. The fangs were…unusual, sure, but Mahiru had never been *scared* of them.

"What in the *world* are you *talking* about, Peko?!" she sputtered. The peaceful atmosphere of their nice afternoon at the park had been completely shattered. "Sure, you can be a little… *intimidating* sometimes to people who don't know you, but menacing? *Horrific*? That's… That's nonsense!"

Looking at Peko, she couldn't imagine how anyone could come to that conclusion. The light filtering through the leaves above made her hair glitter and eyes shine, and Mahiru found herself feeling grateful once again that the whole thing about vampires burning in the sun was a myth.

Peko frowned. "I do not choose to be these things, it is simply what people perceive me to be. All my life, that is how living beings have reacted, so there is no reason to assume otherwise."

Peko spoke matter-of-factly, but after their years together at Hope's Peak Academy, Mahiru could tell when she was hurt. A lifetime of studying people's faces through her viewfinder had taught Mahiru how to see the little things. And more importantly, Peko was her friend! And she was *wrong*! What kind of friend would Mahiru be if she let Peko just keep going with this stupid idea in her head?

"Of course there's reason to assume otherwise! I mean, come on, have you even seen yourself?!"

Peko stared at her blankly, then slowly shook her head.

"Oh…" Mahiru sank back down onto the bench. "That's right. I guess you've…never seen yourself."

As a vampire, of course she hadn't. There wasn't a way to photograph vampires, and as far as Mahiru knew there wasn't a huge effort to discover a way either; vampires were simply too rare for the effort to be worth it. Before Fuyuhiko—and later Peko, when they finally revealed their connection to their friends—Mahiru had never met a vampire.

Mahiru had been complaining for years about how Peko didn't show up in her photos, but it was just a fact of life. But if Peko didn't even know what she *looked* like…

"So, like, seriously. Never? No likeness or anything?"

"Well… There was a family portrait done for Fuyuhiko's twelfth birthday, and he insisted I was included in that… so I know a little bit."

"But nothing else?"

"No. I have never appeared in any photos. Neither has any vampire I know. Portraiture is the only way to capture a vampire's likeness."

Mahiru huffed. "Jeez, no wonder you think this about yourself then. You can't see yourself, and you just have to estimate based on how other people react to you. And you live in such a dangerous, mean world…"

It wasn't the first time Mahiru lamented Peko's status as yakuza, and Peko never entertained it. "Yes, I have never seen myself. And that does not fall particularly high on my list of priorities. It really doesn't matter."

That was obviously not true. Peko's shoulders were hunched in, set in a defensive stance, and the hurt in her eyes was more pronounced. Mahiru *definitely* couldn't let it go now.

She gently took Peko's hands with a sigh, offering a reassuring smile when Peko jolted at the touch. "I know you think that, and I know that's what people have told you. But I don't get it at all. I want you to be able to see yourself how I see you. So I'm going to get a photo of you, and I'm going to prove to you that you're wrong. You're not scary, Peko. You're really cute—really! Beautiful, even."

Peko's face turned pink and her eyes flitted around, looking at everything except for Mahiru. "No vampire I've ever heard of has a photo likeness of themself," she muttered.

"Well, I've been told that I'm the Ultimate Photographer." Mahiru herself had never felt like she lived up to the title, but if it could convince Peko, she was willing to leverage it. "If anyone can do it, it's me, right?"

Peko sighed, exasperated but fond. "Yes, I suppose so."

Mahiru beamed at her. "Great! Are you doing something tomorrow afternoon?"

"I… No?"

"You are now! We've got a photoshoot to do!"

Peko never showed up in Mahiru's pictures, but that was just how it was—until now. With this revelation, Mahiru was determined to change that.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

First things first, Mahiru gathered her arsenal.

Catching a vampire on film would probably be more complicated than a single photoshoot, but her collection wasn't anything to sneeze at! DLSRs were her specialty, but she always had a soft spot for the analog. She definitely had at least enough equipment for a first attempt.

Luckily, the weather was the same as the day before and Mahiru planned to take full advantage. It took her a few minutes to figure out how to balance all her equipment, but soon she was rushing out the door, hobbling to the park as fast as she could without breaking anything.

Peko was already there, looking just as pretty under the trees as she had the day before.

Mahiru called out as she ran up, waving her Polaroid at Peko enthusiastically. The violence of the movement jolted the telelens in her other hand and sent a roll of film tumbling out of her overstuffed pockets as she overcorrected.

Peko's expression was uneasy as she picked up the roll, some amount of trepidation in her eyes. "Mahiru... Are you sure this is all necessary?"

"Necessary?" Mahiru panted, taking the film from Peko's outstretched hand. "We're just getting started! Come on!"

The barest hint of a smile crossed Peko's face as she acquiesced and moved into the light.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

To Mahiru's disappointment but not surprise, Peko didn't appear in any of the photos.

The photos showed picturesque but empty scenery—with the exception of one photo Mahiru had taken selfie-style of the two of them with the Polaroid, just for fun. They had laughed together when she took it, but in the picture, it was just Mahiru's arm around empty space.

It made her sad to look at it.

So of course she did the completely sane thing to do and pinned it to the corkboard above her desk, front and center. She cleared off miscellaneous clutter; other projects could wait. Peko's smile stayed suspended in her mind, but Peko herself had never seen it. Fixing that was now top priority.

So Mahiru started researching. Books and journal articles about photography, vampires, and physics of light quickly filled her desk, and by the end of the week her notes had overflowed onto her walls. With a grant from Hope's Peak (which was easier to get than it should have been, really), she was free to get even more new equipment to experiment with.

A couple more shoots later, though, they were both losing morale. Even with the whole host of equipment she rented, nothing had worked yet. Peko was getting more tired and flustered with each update, and tried several times to convince Mahiru to give up and move on.

But Mahiru remembered Peko's expression that first day at the park, and knew she couldn't. If she didn't manage to do it, who knows how long Peko would go without knowing what she looked like? Thinking of herself as something horrific...

Mahiru would just have to come up with something soon. There was no way she could let this go.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

It was long after the sun went down when Mahiru was suddenly hit with a burst of inspiration. Before she knew it, she found herself hammering down Peko's door, holding a giant cardboard box held together by pink washi tape.

The door opened slowly, and Peko squinted at her, blinking against the harsh light of the dorm hallway.

"...Mahiru? Is everything alright?"

"Yes! I– Yeah!" Mahiru held her contraption aloft, beaming. "I remembered! Camera obscura!"

Peko opened the door slightly wider, rubbing her eyes. "Camera...? What?"

"Camrea obscura! It's this ancient concept, and also a device. It's what makes cameras work. Basically, when light passes through this tiny opening—the aperture—into the dark space of the box, it projects an upside-down and reversed image on the surface across from the aperture."

“And…you have a camera obscura there?”

“Yes! I just built it! Come on, let’s test it out!” Mahiru stepped back from the door to let Peko into the hallway, jumping in place.

But Peko didn’t move. “That’s…great…but I believe this can wait until morning.”

“It absolutely can’t! This is the proof I’ve been looking for!” Mahiru tapped the box. “Basically, if you show up in the camera obscura, then we’ll know for certain that it’s at least possible to get a picture of you!”

Peko’s eyes widened immediately. “How–” Her voice started out scratchy and she cleared her throat, schooling her expression back into neutrality. “How is it that we would know for certain?”

“Because a camera obscura is about reflecting light, and that’s it. There’s nothing it needs to pass through or get printed on. So if you show up in the refraction of light, then it will prove that anytime you *don’t* show up is an issue in the capturing device, not in your actual nature.”

Peko kept her face completely neutral, but she stood straighter, and something glittered in her eyes. “Very well.” Peko stepped out into the hallway, and Mahiru quickly ushered her under a light.

Taking a deep breath, Mahiru raised the camera obscura and looked into the makeshift viewfinder…

And there she was. Upside-down, reversed, and very blurry, but it was Peko staring back at her, unable to hide her curiosity even though the distortion.

Mahiru didn’t realize how loud she squealed until Peko shushed her, though the mirth glinting in Peko's eyes reflected Mahiru's excitement back at her.

After a moment of quieter celebration, Peko’s voice was firm as she told Mahiru in no uncertain terms to go to sleep.

Quickly, Mahiru said her goodbyes and hurried off to bed, more determined than ever. As she drifted off she found herself staring at her walls, trying to determine the best place to put up that future photo of Peko.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

A knock at the door tore Mahiru’s attention away from the papers scattered over her desk.

Opening the door to see Peko was enough to diminish Mahiru’s irritation at being interrupted, but whatever Peko was about to say died on her tongue as she looked past Mahiru into her room, eyes narrowing. Uh oh.

Mahiru quickly stepped through the doorway to block Peko’s view, plastering on a giant, nervous smile. “Hey, what’s up?”

Peko blinked at her once, then pushed past her into the room.

In her fervor, Mahiru had turned her entire dorm room into a darkroom crossed with a research lab. It seemed like a brilliant, convenient solution at the time, but it had really gotten away from her. Most of the space was dedicated to various kinds of photographic processing, with books piled high between developing stations. Sticky notes and photo negatives filled the walls. The only light was her desk lamp, all daylight having been blocked out to preserve the developing film.

Glancing around her own room, Mahiru had to admit that it looked like she was one spool of red string away from absolutely crazy.

“It’s not as crazy as it looks!” she nonetheless yelped as she followed Peko in. “The HPA darkroom just doesn’t have what I need, okay?! It’s *tiny*, and anyone could go in and mess with my stuff– and that’s the reason I’m not doing this at the library! You know, I thought about–”

“Mahiru.” Peko placed her hands on Mahiru’s shoulders. “Please. Calm down, and stop this. This project is affecting your wellbeing. You can’t be doing this for my sake.”

“And why can’t I?!” Mahiru burst out. “Peko, you’re my friend. One of my best friends. And I need to show you that you’re wrong! You’re not scary! Besides, think of how many other people would be excited if I manage to figure this out? I’m the Ultimate Photographer, right? And I proved that there *is* a way to photograph vampires, so I’m going to find it. And you’re just going to have to let me.”

Peko didn’t respond, eyes darting around the room.

Mahiru sighed and spoke again, voice gentler this time. “Sometimes, you just have to accept that people *want* to do things for you.”

Peko’s eyes snapped back to hers. “I…” She sighed and a light blush formed across her cheeks. “In that case, I…appreciate your efforts and your dedication. Your choices are your own, and I will not try to stop you anymore. Just…know that you don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” Mahiru said immediately. “I want to.”

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

That desire kept pushing her onwards. Any time she felt like giving up or even slowing down, that blank photo above her desk pushed her forwards.

She was just about at her wit’s end when, a week later, she finally found a promising lead. It sent her on a hunt along a trail of footnotes, tracking down increasingly older books and articles, until she finally found mention of some experiment notes tucked away in a long-discontinued research journal.

Apparently, there had been some success with producing negatives of vampires when the developer was treated with blood of a mythical creature. It was macabre and highly worrying, but if it worked…

A second required component was replacing the silver in film with something that didn’t repel vampires; they recommended gold.

Asking Fuyuhiko for the materials had been maybe the most mortifying conversation of her life. Having to ask someone to *revive gold emulsion film* was bad enough, but blood too? And on top of that to ask *Fuyuhiko* of all people?! Just the thought made Mahiru nauseous, but she wouldn't back down now, and she couldn't think of another way to get them.

There was virulent pushback from Fuyuhiko, of course—especially when Mahiru insisted that the blood had to be ethically obtained—but once Mahiru explained what it was for and why, his demeanor changed completely. He simply told her to give him a week and ended the conversation there.

Sure enough, a week later, Mahiru was getting ready to head to the park, gold print film loaded into her camera. Even if Fuyuhiko was a vulgar, violent, rude *jerk*, he was at least unwaveringly loyal. And stubborn enough to get what she needed—*ethically*. Mahiru could admire that, at least.

Fuyuhiko was able to get her a small vial of blood and exactly one slide of gold film. So Mahiru had a plan to make it count.

She carefully positioned Peko in the best lighting she could get, under the same trees where they had the conversation that sparked all this. Once everything was set up, she ducked behind the camera, suppressing a smile.

"Oh, I forgot this," Mahiru lied, reaching into the bag by her feet. "Here, catch!"

A stuffed panda went soaring through the air—the cutest, fluffiest one Mahiru could find.

Peko caught the panda in startled awe, her eyes sparkling. The moment she looked back up, Mahiru released the shutter. The camera clicked, and for a brief moment, Mahiru was stunned by Peko's excited smile through the viewfinder.

Mahiru barely spared a moment to beam at Peko over the camera before she frantically packed up her equipment and the two of them hurried back to Mahiru's dorm room turned darkroom.

Hands shaking with adrenaline, Mahiru set up the development solution and submerged the print as fast as she could. Wearing gloves, of course! There was *blood* in there, after all. Peko peered over her shoulder, fangs glinting in the low light.

They waited in silence, the room buzzing with anxious energy.

If this didn't work, then that was it. Mahiru didn't have any other ideas.

Stewing in those worries, Mahiru jumped when Peko finally spoke.

"Mahiru, if this doesn't turn out, just know that…I appreciate your efforts. You doing all of this means more to me than whatever comes out on film. I… am not used to receiving this kind of…" Peko cut herself off, seeming frustrated, and took a deep breath. "I'm not sure how to say it, but…this was nice. Thank you."

Heat bloomed in Mahiru's face and quickly spread to the tips of her ears. "Oh," she said, genuinely lost for words. "Well, um. Y-you're welcome. I was happy to, really. It was important. And…I had fun, too."

Peko responded with a nod, and the silence returned.

Mahiru's face stubbornly stayed warm. Jeez. Peko's words really should have made Mahiru feel less nervous, but it was just so rare for her to express those kinds of things out loud. For some reason, it just made her stomach tie up in knots.

Feeling the jitters overcome her body, Mahiru decided it was a good time to go check on the photo.

Her heart could have burst when she saw Peko smiling back at her.

The photo was everything she had been hoping for. It had the same picturesque scenery as the blank picture tacked above her desk, but the subject was *finally* present.

And Mahiru had captured that moment.

"Well?" Peko asked, anxiety tinging her voice.

Mahiru grinned at her. "I told you."

Peko's eyes widened and she rushed to the desk. She let out a small gasp as she looked down into the tray. "Oh… That's… That's me?"

Mahiru's smile couldn't possibly grow any wider. "Yep. That's you."

"I… Perhaps… It is possible that my assumption was wrong."

Whatever triumph Mahiru felt at being proven right was far outweighed by the fondness she felt, so intense that threatened to overwhelm her. "Yeah," she breathed. "Now you can finally see yourself how I've seen you this whole time."

Peko looked up at her, shocked, flustered, and looked back down at the photo, marveling at it. Slowly, the corners of her mouth turned up and kept rising, and soon she was smiling wide, completely uninhibited, in a way that Mahiru had never seen on her before.

A giddy, affectionate warmth spread throughout Mahiru's body as her heart soared. After weeks of research, frustration, letdowns and hard work…

All of it was worth it just to see that smile.

Living Off Sympathy

Story by Rumi

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

One week and one day ago, Gonta Gokuhara wasn't a vampire.

Then, in a maelstrom of violence and rage, he was.

One second, Gonta was an ordinary human, an accomplished entomologist working on important research at the university, and the next he was *different*. Suddenly, the mere thought of ordinary food turned his stomach. He couldn't enter his own workplace without the receptionist shouting out a "come on in, Gokuhara", which he'd attempted to cover up by lingering outside and sending miscellaneous emails on his phone until she came to get the door for him. He'd found, over the course of the previous week, that he didn't even need to breathe if he didn't want to. He could just sit there, lungs deflated, and feel as alert as ever without needing to move a muscle.

(He chose to continue breathing. It was too familiar not to.)

And, well, he couldn't exactly *tell* anybody, either. He had one colleague who might understand, who defended vampires in conversation, but he and Gonta had been in an awkward situation together the night before Gonta was turned, a situation involving a drink too many and Gonta perhaps coming on a bit strong. So he didn't want to bother *him* with it. At least not yet.

Then, that left one person. One person who Gonta knew could help him.

Gonta knew Ryoma when they were boys. They used to go to school together, back in the Hope's Peak days. They weren't inseparable, weren't the best of friends by any stretch, but Ryoma was always kind to Gonta, and that stuck in Gonta's mind as a reason to trust him. They'd been lunch-table friends, Gonta and Ryoma and Ryoma's girlfriend, which was more than enough for Gonta. He'd noticed the day that Ryoma and his girlfriend disappeared, about halfway through their third year. A note left in Gonta's desk told him where Ryoma had gone.

The rumors swirled, but Gonta knew. Ryoma was a vampire, and he had left Tokyo, never to return.

It had been years since that day, and now Gonta found himself in the same position that Ryoma had. Nobody had figured it out yet, but Gonta was only buying time, really. Being found out could mean being fired, or worse. Vampires didn't exactly have the best standing in society, after all. If he could find Ryoma, maybe things would reveal themselves to him,

and he'd be able to make sense of all this. Maybe.

So he dove into research. Probably not the best thing to use his university connections for, but he was desperate. An old friend of his had become a detective since graduation, and Gonta leaned on her for the bits that he couldn't puzzle out, with no explanation beyond "Gonta needs to find him". The past week had been a flurry of newspapers and housing records, and as soon as Gonta felt ready to lose hope, he found what he'd been looking for. A signed deed, an address hundreds of miles away. Concrete proof.

And then there he was. A plane ticket later, he was in a small town outside Karatsu. It was early evening; the sun had just gone down, casting the little house before him in dim, dusky light. Gonta stared for a while, then summoned his courage and knocked — one, two, three — on the door.

For several moments, he was sure that nothing would happen. Either his research had been incorrect, or Ryoma just wasn't looking for visitors. The nerves welled up inside of him, and he stood there, feeling himself shake, until, after a long while—

The door cracked open. Gonta looked down, and there he was.

"...You shouldn't be here, Gonta," his deep voice croaked forth.

Gonta opened his mouth, then closed it. He felt his words tumble around in his mind, and soon they came spilling out of him — "Please, please let Gonta in."

Ryoma's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"We just — Gonta needs to talk to you."

"What about?" Ryoma sighed. "I haven't seen you since we were practically kids. There's nothing I can give you. Please, just—"

"Gonta's a..."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Ryoma seemed to catch his drift.

Ryoma took in a slow inhale through his nose, which seemed to confirm for him what Gonta was implying. His eyes widened, but he said nothing. Gonta continued to speak.

"...Gonta doesn't know what to do," he said pathetically. "...Help. Please."

For a while, Ryoma just stared up at him, hesitant, like Gonta was some kind of stranger. But, after a few seconds, he opened the door a crack further and stepped aside.

"Come in," Ryoma mumbled, and the invisible wall in front of Gonta dissipated.

He ducked through the doorframe, and when he got inside, he found that his head nearly brushed the ceiling. The lights were all turned off, save for a single floor lamp in the corner. Gonta's contrast to Ryoma had always been stark, but here, in Ryoma's home, Gonta felt a creeping sensation of being especially out of place.

Ryoma sighed, then turned toward Gonta. He crossed his arms and chewed on the inside of his cheek. Gonta noticed, with a quick jolt of surprise, that the house didn't smell like smoke; rather, a different, duller scent had taken over, one Gonta couldn't place. Had Ryoma quit cigarettes?

"So," said Ryoma after a moment. "Was it your choice?"

Gonta blinked. "Was what Gonta's choice?"

"Turning." Ryoma said it plainly.

There was a moment of quiet hesitation. Then, without saying a word, Gonta shook his head.

Ryoma hummed. Confirmation. "It wasn't mine, either," he muttered.

They stood there in the entryway for a while, then Ryoma gestured for Gonta to follow him. Gonta slipped out of his shoes and did so, and he found himself in Ryoma's living room, where Ryoma sat on the couch and patted the space beside him.

Gonta sat there with him. Soon, the space between them was filled by the source of the home's distinctive smell — a little gray cat jumped up onto the couch, sniffing Gonta inquisitively. Gonta's eyes brightened, and the cat climbed onto his lap, laying down and purring, as if it had known Gonta its entire life.

Gonta glanced at Ryoma. "Your cat?"

"Yeah." Ryoma nodded. "That's Ai-chan. She likes you."

"Ai-chan," Gonta repeated in a murmur. His large hand completely covered the cat's head when he petted her.

For a while, neither said anything. Ryoma was the first to fill the silence.

"When I was turned," he said, "everything changed. I guess it's probably been the same for you." He sniffed. "I had to give up tennis, y'know. The thing that made me happiest. And, well... There was this pit where my love for it used to be. A pit that would never fill no matter how much I took from others."

Gonta looked over at Ryoma. He was staring ahead, his eyes sunken and tired. Gonta wondered if his sleepless nights had him looking like that too.

"What does... a *pit* feel like?" Gonta asked.

Ryoma shrugged. "Like you're completely empty," he replied. "Like you've been hollowed out. Like... you need something, desperately, something only another person can give." His gaze slid over to Gonta. "Blood."

The feeling was familiar to Gonta. He felt it as he sat there. He'd felt it for the last several days. *Hollowness* didn't even begin to describe it.

Damn it. He was hungry.

"...What does..." Gonta swallowed. "Feeding. How does Ryoma...?"

Ryoma pressed his lips together. "Well, there's a... There's a black market for this kind of thing," he said. "People give up their blood in exchange for money. It's, ah... It's not exactly legal, y'know. But people do it. And it helps, if you've got the means for it."

Gonta immediately shook his head. "Gonta can't break the law," he said.

Ryoma paused, his eyes turning to look up at Gonta. He then let out a soft laugh, one so similar to the one he'd had in high school that Gonta felt his chest swell.

"You haven't changed a bit, Gokuhara," he said, and Gonta's cheeks would have flushed if they were still capable of such a thing. "Well, you don't *have* to do that. Was just floating it as an option. You could also find someone... y'know, willing."

Gonta frowned. "Someone willing?"

"A partner, or a friend. Someone who'll give you a little to feed off of." Ryoma hummed. "Do you have anyone like that?"

There was a beat of silence as Gonta rummaged through his brain, trying to recall what friends and colleagues he had who might possibly be willing to help and wouldn't expose him. After a moment, he tentatively nodded in a slow, unsure motion.

"Yes," he said. "Maybe. Gonta's not sure."

"Who?"

"A colleague. Shinguji Korekiyo." Gonta tugged on the ends of his hair. "Gonta works with him at the college. He likes vampires. Advocates for us."

Yes... Shinguji would often speak up about vampire rights, often so passionately that Gonta worried he would be fired. It wouldn't be the first time an academic lost their job for defending vampires. Gonta had heard of many such situations in the past. But Korekiyo always spoke up, even against the tiniest microaggressions, with an icy stare and cool-toned voice. He'd told Gonta once, in an empty classroom, that a member of his family was a vampire. Gonta supposed that was enough for him.

The previous situation with him, where Gonta had asked if he could kiss him and saw that look of stricken nerves come over Shinguji's eyes, and Gonta had panicked and left before anything else could be said... Perhaps that could be forgiven. He'd been ignoring texts from Shinguji since his turning, after all, texts that were far more apologetic on Shinguji's part than Gonta could understand... It was time they had an honest conversation, about everything. Gonta could almost feel the tips of his ears burning.

Ryoma nodded and adjusted his position, his gaze turning away from Gonta once more. "Good," he said. "Ask him, then."

For a few seconds, Gonta said nothing. The cobwebs in the high corners shifted in the still air.

"Doesn't Ryoma have someone... willing?"

Ryoma was quiet. He didn't look at Gonta. His eyes were distant, looking far beyond the meager reaches of the house's walls.

"...Do you remember Fumiko?" Ryoma asked.

"Fumiko..." Gonta felt the name in his mouth. "Ryoma's girlfriend from high school. She disappeared too."

"Yeah." Ryoma swallowed. "She moved out here with me. She was my food source."

"Oh!" For a moment, Gonta smiled; Fumiko had been his friend too, after all. But after a fleeting moment, it faded into apprehension. "...Was?"

Ryoma's expression told Gonta everything before he said it. It was the kind of expression Gonta had only ever seen in sad movies, or at funerals.

"She passed away," Ryoma murmured. He bit the tip of his tongue, his left fang worrying at the muscle. "I could taste the sickness in her. Bitter and rotting. But even though we went to the doctor right away..." He shrugged. "I don't know. It was just too late. She lasted nine months."

...Oh.

Gonta's chest caved in on itself. To lose someone so precious in a way like that... He could barely fathom it. And someone Gonta had known and liked, too... He could remember how Fumiko used to laugh, the joy she used to bring out in Ryoma when they were kids. For a moment he thought of asking to hug Ryoma, but the distance between them was palpable, and he elected not to try and close it.

"...It's funny," Ryoma said eventually. "I asked if she wanted me to turn her. To save her life. I mean, she knew she'd die if I didn't. So I offered." He cleared his throat. "But she said no. Said she wanted to live out her life naturally..."

To live one's life naturally. That was a choice Gonta no longer had.

The hatred inside of Gonta began to bubble up and ferment in his stomach. He'd hated himself for a long time — for not being smart enough, kind enough, gentle enough — but this newfound disgust with his very being was nearly too much to cope with. He thought of endless wakes, endless burials, endless black suits. He thought of eternal life. Of how incredibly, terribly unfair it all was. Of how, of all people to be granted immortality, he should certainly be the last.

Needing to take from someone else to live... Gonta couldn't do that.

He felt tears brimming in his eyes, angry ones, when he turned to look at Ryoma again. Ryoma still wore that weary expression, one that stuck him in a faraway place...

But Gonta could see the love in his eyes. The adoration for the one he'd lost.

The hatred died down. The noise inside him subsided.

"...Ryoma is not a bad guy," Gonta whispered.

Ryoma let out a humorless laugh. "*You* sure aren't," he mumbled.

"No, neither is Ryoma!" Gonta's voice rose. "You did what you could, and... And now you're helping Gonta!"

Ryoma shook his head. "I can't even help you." His voice was gravelly, broken. "I just ran from my problems. You shouldn't do what I did."

Gonta stared at him, then reached out and crossed the gap in between them, grabbing Ryoma's hand. "Come back to Tokyo," he pleaded. "You can live in Gonta's apartment."

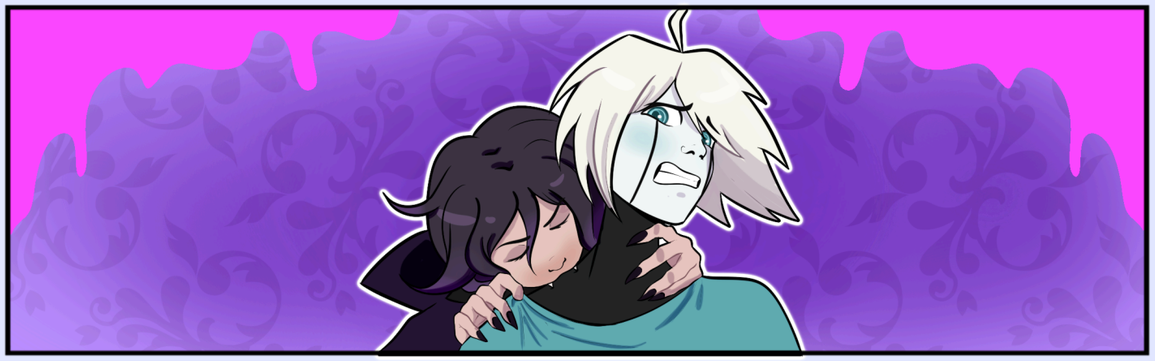
"I can't."

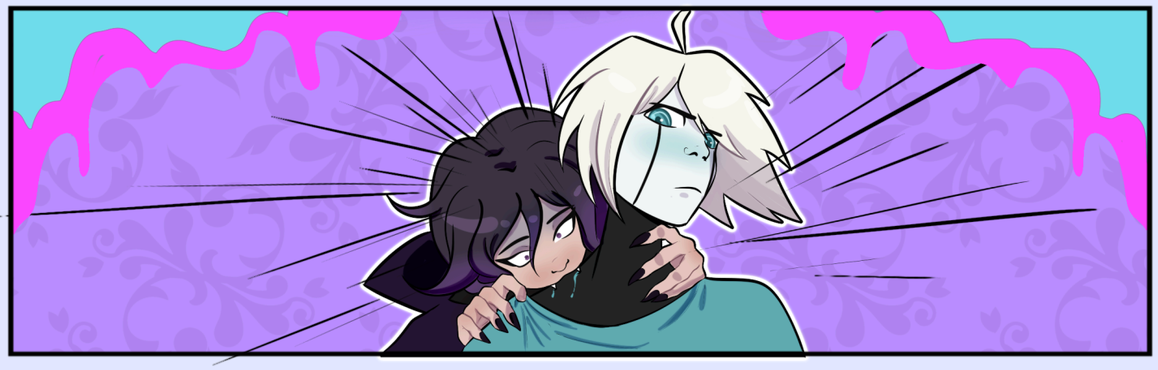
"You can!" Gonta's voice was hard with determination. "You can play tennis again, and... And maybe Gonta and Ryoma can tell people about how hard it is to be a vampire! We can tell them that not all vampires are scary, and, and... maybe the laws will change, and..."

Gonta trailed off. Ryoma's eyes were misty with unshed tears, his brow creased into a worried look. Just as Gonta opened his mouth to apologize, though...

"I'll think about it," Ryoma whispered. It sounded more resigned than optimistic, and it was more than Gonta could have hoped for.

Around one in the morning, Gonta left the little house. He ordered a late-night rideshare back to the airport, careful to hide his fangs as the driver invited him into the car. He bought a plane ticket. He finally texted Shinguji back. He flew home. He cleaned out the spare bedroom. He went to work the next day, and the receptionist let him in like usual.





THAT'S MY HYDRAULIC FLUID
IT'S ICKYYYY
THAT'S WHY I TOLD YOU NOT TO DRINK IT!

Rantaro Amami and the Legend of the Immortal Children

Story by Nelly | Spot Art by Foldable Mattress

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Sometimes, you trip over yourself. In Rantaro's case, that could mean anything from falling face first into a puddle after getting caught in the rain because he didn't care for his weather app to getting a Russian handgun shoved against his temple after being caught hustling the mob boss in a poker game.

It was always a toss up.

He was tough, though. He was smart and resourceful as well. But none of that really mattered in a situation like this. The game had been changed right before his eyes, and adaptability was his only friend.

They certainly *looked* like normal children, toddling around with chipper voices and giggling like they were on a blacktop. Even with his arms bound by rope to his body, this wasn't an abnormal situation nor a different one to when he pissed off someone *very* important; the unbothered presence of children was usually a power move.

"Hey!" The one with red hair gave him an inkling of what he was up against as he padded closer, on all fours like some children did. "He's too skinny, way too scrawny!" A flash of sharpened fangs and the artificial glimmer in those blue eyes immediately made him pause.

Ah.

He'd never really expected to deal with urban legends in the flesh before, but had certainly never ruled them out.

"...Where are your parents?"

"Dead and drained, greenie!"

Maybe one day he'd get a nickname that was a little more thought-out, but he'd give the little one a pass. "So you're...vampire children?"

"We don't use that word, it's too muddied," the one with blue hair said, his tone calm and rational. "You may use the term 'immortal children' and nothing else."

"He's *sooo* cute, are you sure we can't keep him?" Pink pigtails bobbed as the small girl next to him trilled in her place. Somehow, being "kept" like a pet sounded even worse than just being used as a buffet for their tiny teeth.

'*Stay focused, Amami.*' "Listen, I hadn't realized that I had stepped into your territory, and I do apologize for doing so," he'd done this song and dance a thousand times before, "but I need you to let me go, please. I'm looking for someone really important and need to get back to my search."

All three of the children looked between themselves for a moment, like they had just learned a new word and weren't sure which one of them was going to try it out first. Then the one with red hair and the little girl burst out laughing, the former rolling on the floor and kicking his feet while the latter made sure the sound was half-buried in her palms.

Thankfully, the calm one was ready to provide some context Rantaro so desperately needed. "This entire city is our territory now, and we *don't* take kindly to strangers." There was something mildly threatening in that tone, far more than the animalistic hyperactivity of his companions. "If you think that won't be punished, you–"

There was a small simpering sound in the corner, in a section where the traveler's eyes hadn't explored just yet. A man was standing there, unruly white hair wisping as he chuckled and eyes stained like chipped granite sparkling with amusement he did not share.

Had he been standing there *the whole time*...?

"Now, now Shingetsu-san, let's not jump the gun so quickly. Far be it from me, a lowly servant, to question the declarations of the powerful 'Warriors of Neverland', but if you'll permit me, I think keeping this morsel alive is the best option here."

Shingetsu had likely already been annoyed before this guy opened his mouth, those blue eyes rolling as he turned to glare over his shoulder at him. "You are *not* permitted. You were not given permission to speak."

"Aww, c'mon Nagisa, I wanna hear what he says!" the girl pipes in.

"Cause you got a yucky crush," the red-head says, avoiding a swipe from his companion with a snicker.

"Shut the hell up, your stupid face is *sooo* not cute right now, Masaru!"

Shingetsu clears his throat loudly to silence the two before he focuses once again on the only other adult in the room. "Just be quick about it."

The self-proclaimed servant smiles and looks at Rantaro. "If it is someone you're looking for, I can give you the information you need about Towa City without disrupting the paradise my little masters have created. You'd have to stay here, though, but I assume you understand the precaution associated with that. Yes?"

Rantaro didn't like being read, nor the implications dripping off that soft voice. However..
"I think I'd much rather prefer leaving, if you don't mind. I'm a little out of my depth here."
A partial lie if only because he was certainly intrigued.

Paradise? Were there *more* immortal children?

The man's smile widens ever-so slightly. "You're looking for your sister, yes?"

And if that doesn't immediately get Rantaro's eyes to narrow. "How...?"

"Oh, so you *do* want to know more about the city? Excellent, I'm glad to hear that!" The man moves with quick steps, like he's afraid the traveler might speak out again, helping pull him off of his knees by the rope that was digging into his ribcage. "Don't worry, Amami-kun, I'll tell you everything you need to know, if you're willing to listen to a lowly servant."

Shingetsu squinted, suspicion clear. "What the hell are you..."

"He'll just return eventually, I understand his desire. Let your lowly familiar take care of this, don't concern yourselves!" It was said with fake kindness almost, but also an assertion that spoke to his age over the others: he was going to see through to what he wanted, that was clear.

And Rantaro wasn't sure he was okay with this arrangement.

It didn't look like he had a choice, anyways.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

"How's your bread?"

"It's nice. Are you going to tell me about my sister?"

"And the tea?"

Rantaro bites the inside of his cheek to quell his rising annoyance. This guy doesn't seem like the type to string someone along without a reason so he forces himself to cough away a biting remark and offer a carefully practiced smile. "It's certainly *tea*."

The self-proclaimed Servant meets that smile with one-equally guarded. "Isn't it? Most people think boxed green tea lacks in flavor, but I think if you pair it with a little bit of lemon, you can enhance the otherwise muted flavors into something grand!"

He'd never thought of that, and held some comfort that he never would again. "If you don't mind me asking, what exactly is happening in this town? Last time I had heard, Towa City wasn't advertising itself as a mecha for vampire—immortal children." He could draw this out, if he really had to.

Luckily, the other man looked happy enough to indulge. "Ah, are you curious about their Paradise?" He was settling in now, setting the tray with food and drink to the side before delicately seating himself in the chair beside Rantaro. "To put it simply, they wanted a place for themselves, and the adults were standing in their way."

Rantaro's eyes narrowed a sliver. "*All* of the adults are gone?"

"Oh no, not all of them! Some left the city when they could smell blood in the water, some are still begging my little masters to turn them one day because they crave immortal life." He shook his head with a small sigh. "Not that I expect them to understand the gravity of such a decision."

That certainly was...a lot to take in. And while numerous questions were ping-ponging in his head at a dizzying pace, he managed to coolly clear his throat and ask, "Is that what they want to do with me? Turn me?"

The Servant coughed out a small laugh. "Oh dear, I apologize if I gave you that impression. Their first instinct would be to *drain* you, but I wouldn't worry too much about that now. You've been given a free pass, so to speak."

"Because you know my sister."

"I suppose you can put it like that!"

Rantaro tapped his thumbs lightly against his mug a few times, the only sign of his irritation. "Can I ask about her now? About how you know her? I'm sure you understand, considering the circumstances, how I would be concerned about her well-being."

The man's eyes flashed once but the disarming smile was back without skipping a beat. "I suppose I can't ask that you trust that she's perfectly fine and I can send you on your way?"

Rantaro bit both lips hard between his teeth and suddenly stood up, facing the man with all the unfortunate desperation he could probably read off of him mixed with rare exasperation. "I've been searching for her for *years* now. Scrambling across multiple reaches of this globe for just a whiff of her presence, for only the possibility of hope that I might be hot on her trail, only to come up empty. I'm not leaving here without her."

There was one word there that made The Servant perk up, but the light reflecting in those eyes was only a momentary affair. “I have a feeling you’ll walk back on that declaration, Amami-kun.”

“You won’t know for sure until you tell me.”

Strike two, but in an unknowingly good way. The Servant slowly rises from his chair, eyes lidded and smile relaxed. “If that’s how you feel, you’re welcome to follow me.” And then, he pauses. “But only if you can accept what you’re about to see as it is and as *fact*. Can you do that, Amami-kun?”

What a chilling and not-very-helpful-for-his-anxiety question, there. But he was standing regardless, the tremors barely noticeable as they ran down his legs. “Like I said, you won’t know for sure.”

The smile quirks. “Close enough.”

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

The “Warriors of Neverland” certainly had carved out a daunting and almost-comforting space for themselves within the confines of the city littered with skyscrapers. A decommissioned but still high-quality blimp nestled at the top of one of said buildings like a mother bird was just out of reach and yet provided any illusion of power.

It was a remarkable choice for as young as they were.

The Servant drifted through the main hallway of the dirigible like a ghost, not even checking to see if Rantaro was following him (not that he needed to) nor distracted by anything prior—truly like a phantom with one singular purpose.

Rantaro wasn’t sure if he was relieved or unnerved by it.

He was eventually led into what used to be the main compartment of the airship, likely the old dining area. The three children from before were there busying themselves, as well as another small child wearing a bag of some kind over their head, waddling back and forth between their compatriots nervously.

“Aww, still alive, huh?” The redhead—Masuru, was it—looked disappointed in seeing Rantaro again, which made him chuckle a little.

“I get lucky like that sometimes.” He doesn’t notice The Servant's reserved expression almost breaks.

Shingetsu’s otherwise relaxed expression soured a little as he too looked over at the newcomers. “He shouldn’t be here.”

Their adult companion waved his hand, using the other to hold a finger up and quiet the pigtailed-girl’s sudden boisterous delight in the background until she pouted. “This will just take a moment, I assure you although I apologize for the intrusion regardless. Where is Monaca-san?”

Rantaro’s ears perked. Monaca?

The boy with blue hair almost seemed offended that he had even asked but before any words could escape him, a tinkling voice sounded from behind the still-standing bar, a voice that almost gave the traveler some whiplash. From behind the polished wood, a little green head popped up, equally chartreuse orbs peeking. “I found your hairbrush, Kotoko-chan!”

Kotoko looked pleased at the development. “Ahh~! Thank you, Monaca-chan! If it wasn’t for Masuru having a devilishly ugly face, I wouldn’t have lost it in the first place!”

“Wh…? It’s not my fault you *threw it* at me!”

“Settle down,” Shingetsu scolded them before his expression softened as he quickly ushered himself over to the new girl. “You really shouldn’t be overexerting yourself like this.”

Monaca merely smiled at him. “You said that yesterday. And the day before that.”

“And I’ll keep saying it until you recover from the turning completely,” he responded, standing up straighter. That strong pose went out the window quickly, however, when the girl gave a small laugh, his cheeks visibly heated.

“You’re such a stickler for the rules, Nagisa.” And then, those green eyes fell on The Servant and her head tilted. “Oh? Who’s that?”

The man with white hair gave her a small bow. “Only your dearly devoted familiar. I’m sorry to see your memory isn’t faring well today, my little Master.”

The girl didn’t seem bothered by this, drifting closer with slow steps. “Tomorrow will likely be better.” And, finally, those eyes carried over to Rantaro. “Is he a familiar that I don’t remember as well?”

The familiar puffed out a laugh. “Just a humble traveler passing through. He was looking for someone important to him and happened upon your Paradise. Isn’t that right, Amami-kun?” And those stone-colored eyes flickered to the other man’s face.

As predicted, the second Monaca came into view, Rantaro froze up. She had been young when lost, around the tender age of five, but he’d recognize her face anywhere.

It was *her*. It was **Mizu**—

“Are you really going to be so impolite?” Nagisa’s words cut through his momentary shock, those blue eyes narrowed with protectiveness.

Rantaro coughed once. “Oh…Oh, no, I—” And he looked down at Monaca. “I’m so sorry, Monaca-san.” He had learned from The Servant. “You just…remind me of someone I used to know.”

The little girl smiled. “That person you’re looking for?”

And if that didn’t put it all into perspective right then and there. She was here, she was certainly older than when he had lost her, and yet…this wasn’t really her anymore, was it? He didn’t even know the truth of the young girl standing before him, and that fact alone was a little too much to handle at the moment.

He gave a small bow. “…Terribly sorry, I just need a moment.” And without waiting for any permission, he turned away, ducking back into the never-ending hallway.

Monaca looked a soft combination of confused and slightly injured. “Did I…?” She looked between her friends and familiar.

Said white-haired man hadn’t stopped looking at Rantaro as he fled the scene, something darkening his expression. “It was not your fault, my little Master. Do not worry yourself, I will see to what’s troubling him.”

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

The traveler hadn’t made it far, having shoved himself against one of the windows like he was looking for an escape route. The Servant gave a little sigh, one only-barely dripping with concern as he approached.

“I warned you that—”

Rantaro didn’t give him much time to pontificate, immediately grabbing him by the front of his shirt, a simple blade pressing almost half-heartedly to his white throat. “Is she happy?”

The Servant tilted his head, as if he wasn’t even phased. “Sorry?”

“My sister, is she *happy*? With her friends here? Like *that*?”

The man took a deep breath. “Very much so. Her life with the Towa Conglomerate wasn’t glamorous to say the least, and I think that she’s relieved to have a family to call her own. When her memory problems resolve themselves, of course.”

Memory problems, an unhappy home life, a *family*…

He was supposed to be her family.

“You could stay here, you know.” The man was speaking again, slithering around so he was facing the traveler. “Become their familiar like me? I don’t think she’d ever remember you, but there is always the hope of rekindling something more.” Like he was reading his mind.

He almost wanted to snap at him, tell him that he didn’t *want* “something more”, he just wanted his little sister safe and sound and in his arms once again.

And yet…

“You swear she’s content, yeah?” He was pulling his switchblade back and putting it into his pocket. “And safe here?” He had a feeling he already knew the answer to that: the only people that seemed to be in danger in this city were the ones several hundred feet below them.

“As happy as she can be.”

Perhaps he could live with that. “Fine…” He was pacing for a moment after pulling back, eyes flashing to that door every other second or so. “That’s all I wanted here—wanted for *her*. What kept me going *as* I was going.” He didn’t know why he felt so comfortable with spewing his vulnerability here, to this stranger.

He wasn’t going to question it.

“She needs to stay here.” He said with finality as he reached into his pocket swiftly. “But I need you to give her something.”

The Servant was about to open his mouth to ask what it might be before a small, golden locket was shoved in his hands. He observed it carefully as Rantaro continued to speak, “I kept it with me, as a good luck charm, I suppose.”

There it was again, that *word*… “And the inside?”

“A picture of myself, our siblings and father. I know she doesn’t remember, but she should have it anyway. At least we can remain with her in some aspect.”

He stared at it a little longer before giving a hum of mirth, pocketing it. “I shall keep it safe.” Those granite eyes were on him again. “What will you do now, Amami-kun?” A loaded question if ever there was one.

And there wasn’t an answer to it. Not yet.

“I’ll be checking in, alright? I need to make sure she’s… thriving, as much as she can be.” He still had questions, so many questions, but he was pushing them down as best he could. It wasn’t important right now, and he knew he’d have a better time to grill this man to his heart’s content. “Because if something happens to her, or her friends, *I* won’t be happy.”

The Servant chuckled. “A familiar’s loyalty does not die, I assure you. I will keep her safe.”

And, strangely, that was…enough. Candy-coated relief he believed he would never feel was lapping at his heart rapidly, and he relished the cooling effect as it gushed down his spine.

She was okay. And Rantaro Amami could find satisfaction in that, one day.

NO SOLICITING
CALL ME
justsomedumbstuff

"KOTO!!
You've gotta help me...
Let me have some of your blood!
Please...
I am... NOT doing that.
PLEASE

The Bloodsucker's Trail

Story by Jimcloud | Spot Art by zetsubobu

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Eat a bit of garlic (disgusting as it may be). Keep a silver crucifix on your person. Get a stake ready, and a hammer to drive it in. Those are all of the essentials... or, well, all of them that I know of. I'm ready now.

Hope's Peak Academy has a vampire in its midst, and I won't rest easy until I've confronted him.

...It sounds ridiculous, I know. It *feels* ridiculous, just to talk about it. I'm honestly lucky that Momota-kun believed me, when I confided in him. And that he believed me when I told him that this confrontation is something I have to do myself. I don't feel like there are, well, *good* odds of this ending peacefully... But if it happens, it'll be if I come to him alone.

That's how it's always been with Ouma Kokichi, after all.

I wipe the sweat from my palms on a handkerchief before sizing up the door for, oh, only the third time or so. Maybe a bit excessive... I guess I don't have much to do here except come to terms with my own mortality.

Alright, alright, enough. I bring my hand up and knock once, twice, three times on the door. I try to take a second to breathe, but I barely finish my third knock before the door opens on the other side. Bright violet eyes pierce through me as a wide grin reveals sharp teeth behind it.

"Saihara-chan," Ouma drawls out, sounding as casual as can be, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

He *can't* be as relaxed about it as he's acting, not with the secrets he has. With the door open, I smell sugar on him, like I always do, but close as he is... It's hard not to pick out the faint smell of blood in the air. I always feel like I smell it when he passes me by these days. It was one of the last odd things I noticed about him.

I can't get distracted now. I swallow, build my focus. "I need to talk with you," I explain. "Do you mind if I come inside?"

Ouma gasps. I tense, and his grin widens. "Before marriage? Oh, Saihara-chan, think of the scandal!" He giggles to himself as he prances inside.

I can only sigh in response. I don't know what I expected, after all this time agonizing over this... But Ouma is still Ouma. I can only hope that stays true when I'm done here.

I step inside, closing the door behind me. My eyes wander across the room as I do, and it's... a mess. Papers are strewn everywhere, including plans for some pranking objects that, at a glance, I believe I have been victimized with. There are a few water balloons lying languidly on the floor, a mess of opened and unopened soda cans on every spare surface, including a minifridge, to say nothing of the horse head mask resting on the bed. Is this *seriously* the secret lair of a vampire?

...Shuichi. This room is full of noise. You have to focus on the things that matter in the thick of it.

My eyes fall on a dark parasol near the entrance. I've seen Ouma using it a few times - he never seems to go outside without it, at least not during the daytime.

"So! Are you gonna tell me what's going on, or are you just gonna gawk?" Ouma asks, from the comfort of his bed. "I charge by the minute for the experience, I'll have you know."

I clear my throat. "Ah, no, that won't be necessary," I say. "I suppose I'll get right to the point, then. I have reason to believe that you are something other than human. A vampire, to be precise."

For once, Ouma's face falls. He regards me with a neutral expression and keeps his silence for a long moment. Then, suddenly, he beams. "Oh! Saihara-chan is setting me up to tell me that I suck! Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you're not the first guy to hit me with that one."

"What?" I blink as I take a second to parse that. It's so far from where my head was at, it takes me far too long to understand the bad joke. "Uh, no. I'm serious, Ouma-kun."

"Ooooh, you're *serious*," Ouma repeats. His cunning gaze meets mine – it feels like it's piercing right through me. "You won't mind giving me some *evidence*, then, will you? Because otherwise, this claim is a bit ridiculous, don't you think?"

"Mm. I don't mind." I bring my hand to my chin to help me think. "I've been building my case for some time now."

"Not too long, I hope!" Ouma smiles once again, flashing his sharp canines my way. "Why, just *think* of all the innocents I could have slaughtered in that time if I really *am* a vampire!"

That thought makes me take a step back, leaning against the door. I press both my hands against it. "I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you."

Ouma shrugs his shoulders. "Suit yourself, detective."

I suck in a breath and let out a sharp exhale, pushing the thought of Ouma's could-be victims from my mind before stepping forward. I can't let him control this conversation. I have to take charge of it.

"Well, let's start with the most obvious – and circumstantial – evidence," I say. "Vampires are described as having deathly pale skin... Which is a description that certainly fits you."

"Yeah, me plus half our class," Ouma says, looking at his hand as he does. He's not smiling. "You were *not* kidding about circumstantial, detective! If this is all you've got, I'm downright offended. Good news about your prospects for joining the police force, though!"

Low blow. "I wasn't done," I respond, unable to help a bit of a whine and a cringe as I do. "In addition to that, you take a great amount of effort to *avoid* anything that might tan your skin. You've specifically selected one of the only seats in class that avoids any light hitting it during the day, and you never venture to the part of the classroom that's getting light, even when you're focused on something else."

Ouma gasps. "Wow! I didn't know you noticed that! *I* sure didn't notice that! You've been watching me so closely! Saihara-chan, are you in love with me!?"

I sigh, running a hand down my face. "Ouma-kun."

"Not a no!" Ouma jabs, unable to keep quiet for one second.

I remind myself that Ouma is potentially an extremely dangerous monster, which is about the only effective deterrent from walking over there and shaking the living daylights out of him.

"This isn't to say you never go outside," I continue. "However, when you do, you wear heavier clothing than usual – clothing that covers all of your extremities quite thoroughly. And for the rest, you use a dark parasol to absorb all of the daylight and keep it from reaching you." I point towards it now – it's rather close to me. "As a matter of fact, the only occasions I can remember seeing you outside without it would have been... after the sun already set."

"Whoa, that's crazy!" Ouma stands himself up off his bed, giving me an innocent-looking expression. "You'd think the purpose of a parasol was to block sunlight or something... Is it really a crime to like fashion and not like the sun so much? I'll have you know, I don't exactly tan. I burn."

Yeah, I'll bet.

I can't shake the feeling that Ouma isn't taking this seriously. At the beginning, I felt like there was a hint of something; some kind of recognition of how severe the stakes here are. Right now, though, there's nothing. It feels almost like he's just... toying with me.

It's frustrating.

I take a few steps forward, nimbly dodging a piece of paper and an empty can rolled out on the floor. "That sounds very difficult for you," I say, dryly. I cross my arms. "It doesn't help your case that you make comments like that all the time, either..."

"Huh?" Ouma's eyes grow saucer-wide. "Comments like what, Saihara-chan?" If you didn't know him at all, you might think this looks innocent.

I sigh. "Comments about how you can't handle sunlight, references to being dead or being batlike, self-comparisons to other bloodsucking animals like mosquitos, leeches, or bedbugs..."

"Is it a *crime* for someone's favorite animal to be a leech!?" Ouma cries, pouting now.

"It *is* a bit concerning, but that's tangential to the point," I say. "At a certain point, the sheer volume of jokes stops being something you can write off."

"Really?" Ouma takes a step forward, closer to me. His hands splay behind his back. "But jokes are my stock in trade. Jokes and lies, that is. So really, all this shouldn't be any surprise. I've been on a vampire kick lately. If you want to make accusations, surely you've got *real* evidence, *riiiight?*"

I sigh. "Of course I do," I say. I move forward, closing the distance between us. Sure enough... "You can try to mask it, but I have a good nose. I can smell the blood on you."

Ouma's eyes widen, and his expression falls to neutral once again. I've got to press now.

"And don't try to tell me you've been injured recently," I add. "This isn't the first time. In fact, every time since the first time, when I've gotten close enough, I've smelled the blood on you. Your skin is cold, too... unnaturally so."

"My skin? When did you..." Ouma's face brightens with recognition. "Oh, of course! When I leapt into the arms of my knight in shining armor!"

I sigh. "If you mean when you leapt into my arms to try and get me to save you from Momota-kun, who was chasing you, then yes, that would be when I am referring to."

Ouma's smile grows mischievous. "Well, it worked, didn't it?" he asks.

"Mostly because I ended up distracted, and Momota-kun was distracted by that..." I mutter, before shaking my head. "But that doesn't matter. The point is, *that* at least is physical evidence."

"Why haven't you taken it further?" Ouma asks, bringing a finger to his lips. "That's what *I'd* do, if I were you, Saihara-chan. Surreptitiously hit me with a crucifix, get me with some

silver... Then you'd have a little bit more than this silly, circumstantial list of claims. None of this proves beyond doubt that I'm a vampire, y'know."

"Um... I really don't have any reason to do that yet," I say, shifting in place. "If you are a vampire, then I have some serious concerns to address... But it'd be a bit inhumane of me to attack you out of nowhere just because I know you have a weakness."

...And I don't know if I could do it, if it wasn't self-defense. To anyone, but... especially not to Ouma. There's just something about the idea that feels so uncomfortable.

"I see!" Ouma says, beaming. "That's nice and soft of you, Saihara-chan. But, you know, I really do think there's an important counterargument you've left out of this little mock trial."

"And that is?" Good odds it's just another lie or a joke, but I'll hear Ouma out.

A grin shows on Ouma's face, but it's not one I'm familiar with. It's more than sly – it looks almost... evil. "If I really *am* a vampire, then you've gone and wandered right into my lair, and you're not even ready to kill me. That's a real rookie mistake."

I don't even have time to respond. It's like Ouma is in front of me one second, then gone the next. I hear a sharp clicking sound behind me. My blood turns to ice.

I hear my pulse in my ears as I turn around. Between me and the door is one Ouma Kokichi, licking his lips.

"Oh, Saihara-chan," Ouma says, his voice laden with something I can't identify, "you know, I've always had my eyes on you. I figured if anyone, you might figure out my secret. And I've given a lot of thought to just what I'd do with you afterwards!"

This – this can't be happening.

"I told someone I was coming here," I stammer out, hastily, "if I don't show back up, he'll know, and then–"

Ouma raises his eyebrows as he stalks slowly towards me. "And then? All it takes is a little vampire hypnosis, you know. Momota-chan won't remember a thing."

Shuichi, you really messed up. It's just...

"I thought– I thought you were different," I insist. "Does all the time we spent together really mean nothing to you?"

"Oh, it means everything to me!" Ouma insists. "I'll really miss you, Saihara-chan, and that's no lie. But, *well*, when you're a vampire..."

My hands fumble in my pockets for the crucifix. Why did I put it below the stake!? How was I even going to get that into him?

One of Ouma's hands grabs my wrist, grip too strong to pull away from. The other grabs my shoulder. It's cold, cold and dry. It feels colder than ever.

"You get used to the things you love leaving you," Ouma purrs into my ear. The hair on the back of my neck stands up on end.

"Ouma, wait-!" I shout.

"Goodbye, Shuichi," he murmurs, barely loud enough to reach my ear even as close as he is.

I can't see it, as close as he is, his hair the only thing in my view. I can only *feel* him breathing on me, every new sensation electric as he draws close, every moment I hold onto life feeling like an eternity.

He exhales against my neck. I feel his teeth against my skin. And then...

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Something very *wet* touches my neck, and I shudder.

"Gotcha," I think Ouma says, hard as it is to tell. His damn *tongue* is still stuck out his mouth.

All at once, it's like a spell is broken. Ouma pulls away, one of his hands curling a lock of hair around a finger. He looks at me with exasperation and sighs.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Saihara-chan," Ouma says. "When you confront a vampire for real, I don't wanna see this wishy-washy 'still want to talk' business. You *dooo* know they drink your blood, right?"

I blink. With all the adrenaline in my system, this is still catching up to me. Ouma... isn't killing me?

"Was this all... a joke?" I manage, sucking in a breath.

"Um, yeah," Ouma says, raising an eyebrow. "Wow, I really got you good, huh? 'You get used to the things you love leaving you.' Talk about a cliche!"

"But, but you–" I don't manage to finish. Ouma passes me by and picks his way through the cluttered room.

Ouma giggles. "You should see your face! You look like you saw a ghost! Or, like a vampire, or something."

I turn to keep Ouma in my view, completely at a loss for words. That seriously can't *all* have been an act... was it? He felt so strong, and he moved so fast...

Ouma kneels down at his minifridge, popping it open. He grabs a translucent plastic bag filled with...

Huh.

Ouma's sharp teeth poke a hole in the blood bag, and he grabs a disposable straw and pokes it into the hole before starting to slurp. He raises an eyebrow at me as I gawk at him *drinking blood* in front of me.

Ouma stops drinking and lets out a sigh. "What, you want some?" he asks. "I can't exactly warm it up for you in here..."

"I don't drink blood!" I yelp. "So, you really are..."

"*Nooo* idea what you're talking about," Ouma says, before he starts slurping his, erm, blood, in double time.

I sigh, bringing a hand up to my face. "You are impossible. You know that, right?"

"Aw, c'mon, don't be so negative!" He wiggles the half-empty bag at me. "By the way, you'll never guess what type this blood is."

I stick out my tongue before continuing. "I don't want to know," I say, firmly. "Don't tell me *that*."

Ouma grins. "This is what you wanted, Saihara-chan!" he insists. "If you wanted to find out I was a vampire, you've gotta learn to live with it."

This is so completely not what I wanted, *or* what I feared. I didn't even have this possibility in mind.

But, that said... He had me right there, at his mercy. He could have done anything he wanted with me... and he didn't. Obviously he needed blood, because he's drinking some right now, but he didn't touch me. (Well, he didn't touch my *blood*. What a mean prank.)

"You have a remarkable amount of self-control," I comment, which seems to take him off guard.

"Mm?" Ouma's brow pinches. "Don't make a thing out of it, Saihara-chan. Your blood smells nasty and I bet it tastes nastier. That's all there is to it."

...Is that really true?

"Well, thanks," I say, sounding a little put out. Come to think of it, I guess I am a little put out.

Why? It's not like I *want* Ouma-kun to suck my blood, obviously.

...Um.

That is to say, well. Ah. Anyone would want to, um... be at the mercy of someone you know likes you, who you trust not to go too far. It's not weird. It's... you know what, never mind, we're not thinking about that.

I'd much rather think about Ouma. I came in here confronting him for his secrets. It was always something I thought was going to go badly. Even in the best case scenario, I thought it'd strain our friendship. And yet... here he is, standing here like he doesn't have a care in the world, doing what he can not to hurt anybody, even though he's a vampire. I wasn't completely sure about him before, with all the lies and the pranks, but I think I know him now.

He really is a good person, isn't he?

Forever Linked

Story by Emi | Spot Art by Villain

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Byakuya tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket and pushed open the discreet side door of the club, stepping out into the alleyway. Though it was late and the streets were empty of all but the sort of drunken wanderers who'd pay him little attention anyway, he preferred remaining discreet. Unseen. Mortals these days were far more trouble than they were worth.

A couple of steps into the chill, rainy night and the world proved him right. The toe of his dress shoe collided with something solid. Humiliatingly, Byakuya stumbled, barely managing to right himself before he glanced down to see what had nearly made him fall for the first time in at least a century. Vampiric vision clear as ever in the pitch black alley, he saw a young man sprawled across the rain-soaked asphalt, probably in his early 20s. He wore the shabby, casual clothes of a modern commoner, and all around him, blood pooled and mingled with the rain, leaking from his torn-out throat.

How gauche. Just what kind of clientele was Ludenberg allowing in these days? Any self-respecting vampire knew to take out their trash instead of leaving it for someone to trip over. A growl building in his throat, Byakuya leaned down and grabbed the corpse by the arms, intending to haul it over by the dumpsters for Ludenberg's servants to deal with. But before he could take a single step, the body surprised him by *groaning*, eyelids fluttering weakly to reveal a flash of hazel looking directly at him.

The mortal that had been drained out here by one of his most distasteful compatriots was still alive.

It would be unreasonable for Byakuya to care. He'd been turned centuries ago, and had seen plenty of violence in that time. He didn't think of himself as a sadist, but he had no objection to using force when it was the best way to achieve his ends. If he was in his right mind, he would have hauled this pitiful specimen over between the dumpsters just as planned and headed out of the alley. His driver was idling at the curb just around the corner waiting for him.

Instead, led only by a strange pang in his chest, Byakuya dropped the stranger's arms and sank to his knees on the wet ground beside him. Perhaps, if he wasn't so well-practiced at burying them, images might surface in his mind of himself, throat nearly ripped out and left to suffer through the agonies of turning alone on the ground. A sire who cared for nothing but the sadistic pleasure of taking lives in his hands. The longing he'd felt back then for someone to guide him in the cold, dark world outside the Togami dynasty. Someone like he could be now. His glasses—worn only for aesthetic value, these days—were blurring with raindrops, but he spared not a moment to wipe them off. He could do this without seeing. He yanked up one perfectly starched cuff, baring his own wrist, and sank his fangs into the veins without hesitation.

When the dark blood was flowing thickly as it should, Byakuya brought his wrist away from his own mouth and pressed it to that of the dying man, who was gurgling in what might have been an attempt to plead with him for mercy. Byakuya didn't care what he had to say. He was doing this, and that was final.

"Drink," he ordered. And the man drank.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

What was easy to decide in the pre-dawn alleyway was more challenging to grapple with at home after a restless sleep. Byakuya had ordered his servants to watch over the stranger—Naegi Makoto, said the ID in his wallet—while he slept, but as it turned out, rest was impossible to come by. Tossing and turning in his bed, thick velvet curtains drawn to block out the sun, his thoughts unerringly returned, again and again, to the new vampire in the guest room down the hall.

Eventually, lying around any longer seemed pointless. Inefficient. Byakuya despised inefficiency. He rose from bed, pulling on a silken robe over his pajamas and sliding his feet into matching slippers. Naegi would surely be asleep or at the very least barely lucid, so there was no need to concern himself with being seen like that.

Naegi, sheets a sweaty tangle around him, still in his bloody clothes from the previous night, writhed. His expression, even in unconsciousness, was the picture of misery. Having already sent the servants out of the room, Byakuya extended a hand. His thumb smoothed out some of the tension in that furrowed brow, feeling the way Naegi's temperature was already cooling below mortal levels. He brushed sweaty bangs out of his face, studying the way that agonized expression seemed to contort into something a little more pleasant in response to his touch.

He kept up his gentle touches, letting his fingers trail down along the border of Naegi's face to caress his cheek, tracing the line of his cheekbone through chilly skin. He outlined his jaw, cupped his chin. Too soft. Unforgivable. He jerked the sleeping man's mouth open, checking for the development of fangs. Sure enough, they were already starting to poke out through swollen gums, too fresh to retract yet. Byakuya brushed the pad of his thumb over one razor-sharp point, pressing down almost hard enough to draw blood. Acceptable.

When he let Naegi's mouth close again, his thumb lingered too close, brushing over the soft fullness of his lower lip. He belonged to him. Byakuya's to shape into a proper vampire, teach everything he needed to know. If he intended to do it right, and indeed, Byakuya did everything right, they would be living together for years, maybe decades. Long enough to make his charge respectable. His other hand came up to brush over his own neck, outlining the borders of a wound long since vanished.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and with a reflexive glance at the door, gathered the sleeping Naegi into his lap.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

"So all this is real," Naegi murmured, just enough to jolt Byakuya out of his reverie. Hours had passed since he'd woken up and come to check on his new charge, most of that time spent right there easing him through what remained of the transformation process. Confessing what he'd done was harder than he expected it to be, even if it was for the sake of saving Naegi's life, but he'd wrestled his way through the conversation with his usual cold efficiency and thought that was the end of it. Perhaps not.

"Yes," he replied, inching a little closer to him on the bed again. Their thighs bumped, only barely. "I wouldn't lie to you about something as important as the eternity that awaits you. What would be the point in that?" Naegi was fidgeting with the bag of blood he'd brought in for him, picking at the edges of the plastic and watching the crimson liquid slosh around within. His expression was caught somewhere between hunger and disgust, a feeling that, if he dug very deep down within himself, Byakuya could remember from the early days of his own transformation.

"I... I don't know. I don't know *anything* about you! But if it's true that you saved my life, I guess there wouldn't be much point in lying to me about being a vampire. It's just... really unbelievable." Naegi chuckled weakly, a hand coming up to massage at his temple as if trying to work away a headache. The other hand still toyed with the bag of blood, warming the longer it was out of the fridge.

"Be careful with that, you imbecile. If you spill blood all over my nice sheets and waste it, I'm going to be very displeased." To a Togami scion, the waste of a single bag of blood was negligible, but he didn't want to encourage bad habits. "Here." He reached over and

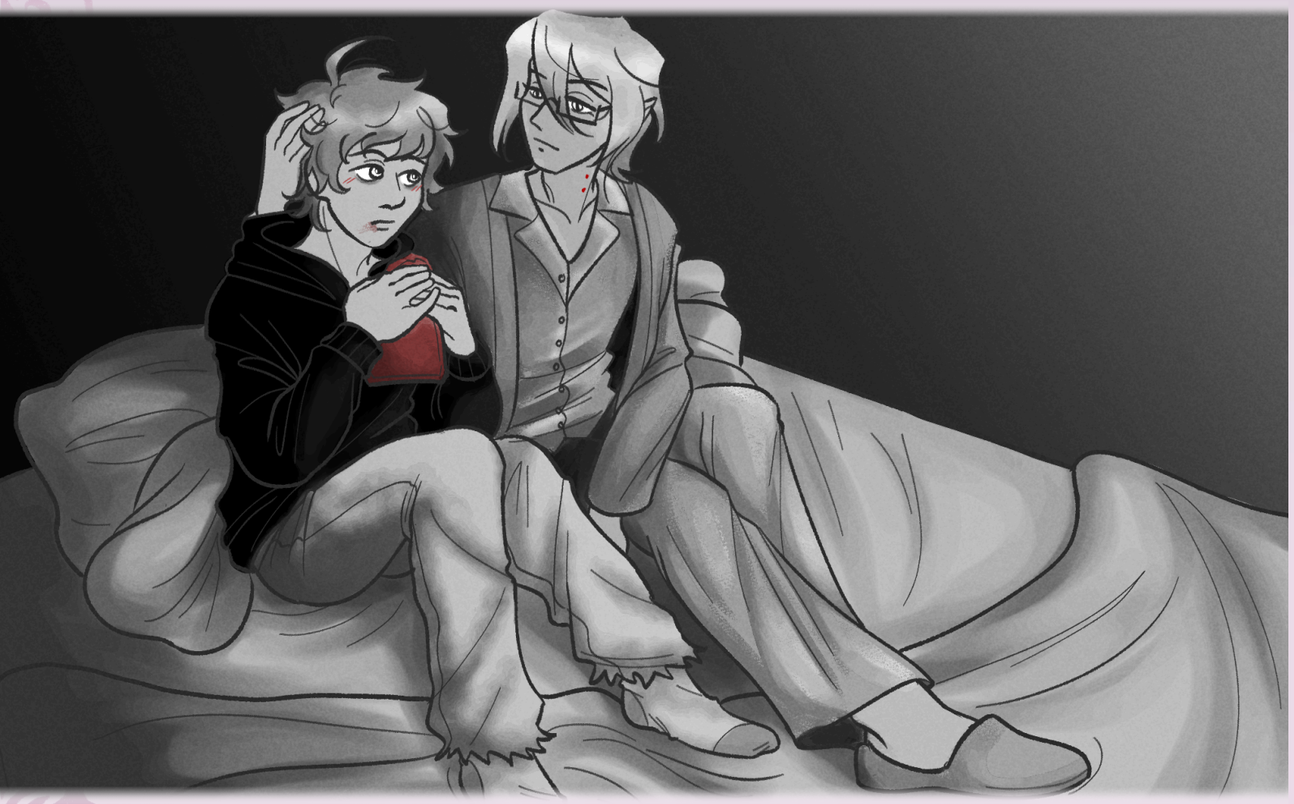
pressed the cool plastic of the bag to Naegi's mouth pointedly. "Bite. There's no need to rip it open with your hands."

It took several frustratingly long moments for him to comply, but eventually, Byakuya heard the quiet *pop* of fangs puncturing plastic. He watched Naegi's throat work as he drank, then allowed his gaze to wander up to his face once more, watching the relief spread. It was almost as pleasant as being the one drinking.

"As I said earlier, you'll be living here with me for the foreseeable future. That's the easiest way to handle all this. As your sire, it's my responsibility to teach you everything there is to know about being a vampire. Those without sires as generous as me are those who run wild killing indiscriminately and making nuisances of themselves, much like the one who drank from you. No one belonging to *me* will behave like that."

Naegi raised his head from the blood bag, temporarily abandoning what was left inside.

"Belonging to you?"



"Well…" Byakuya looked away and cleared his throat, violently glad that he'd been a vampire far too long to have the ability to blush. "In a technical sense, yes. We can determine the specifics of our relationship in time, so for now, finish your meal. You need more nourishment than you think at first."

"Okay." Naegi's face, when Byakuya ventured a glance over, was tinged faintly pink. Still too close to the living to hide when he was flustered. "And… Togami-kun? Thanks for saving me."

"Yes, yes. Just drink, Naegi."

And, with Byakuya's fingers stroking mindlessly through his hair, Naegi drank.

The Lure of Sharp Fangs

Story by Bandit

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

"Oh, no! Princess Piggles is about to succumb to the Dread Vampire Roberts! Whatever shall we do?"

Find out next time on ***Princess Piggles: The Lure of Sharp Fangs****!*

Hifumi rereads the latest installment of his doujin, checking for missed words, inconsistent narration, grammatical issues, and – more importantly – the artwork of his favorite Princess Piggles. Did he get the swoop of her hair as it falls gracefully from her heart-shaped ponytail holder right? Is her heart-shaped mole in the exact perfect spot of her right cheek? Are her eyes the correct contrast of blue against the shades of red and pink enveloping her, making sure that her eyes pop perfectly as they reflect the looming vampire leaning to bite her neck?

Everything *looks* right.

…

Of course, everything looks right! He's Hifumi Yamada! The Ultimate Fanfic Creator! He's drawn Princess Piggles in a million ways – from Canon to Coffee Shop AUs to a What If scenario where she never became a magical girl – and he certainly has her right this time! He *always* has her right! The creators of Princess Piggles may know her just as well as he does, but if tens of thousands of fans say they like what *he* wrote more than canon, then who is he to say they're wrong!

…although he *is* concerned that his new vampire design for Boartick, Princess Piggles's archnemesis, isn't quite right. Boartick won't make his appearance until much later, but Hifumi wants his design locked in as soon as possible. Waiting until the last minute will do him no favors!

Besides, Hifumi's focus on his Vampire AU allows him to avoid the freshest wave of Princess Piggles fandom discourse. The latest installment, *Princess Piggles Goes to Washington*, is nothing more than a rant disguised as a story. It's the worst kind of writing!

Unappealing! Trash!

Hifumi clenches his bottle of Diet Coke as he considers the writers and fans tearing apart his beloved Princess Piggles, who *dare* to suggest that she could be anything other than the sweet, loving angel *with a dark side* that he knows her to be! There's a balance in writing her, and *after a struggle with the darkness*, her light side *always* wins!

…

With the exception of *Princess Piggles: Murder House*, but no true fan considers that trash *canon*.

"You've got that all wrong, you know."

The bored voice breaks through Hifumi's internal monologue, and Hifumi almost thanks whoever is speaking until he realizes what was said. His eyes narrow into pinpoints.

"I assure you, I have only the most faithfully canon interpretation of Princess Piggles, and any suggestion that I have deviated from the source material in any way that is considered *wrong* is! just! *wrong!!*"

Hifumi can't help himself. The full weight of his frustration that *anyone* would think he had written – or drawn! – Princess Piggles *wrong* comes out. His eyes scan the page front and center on his tablet just to make sure, but no! Everything is perfect! *Perfect!*

How dare this unwashed, stinky miscreant dare to suggest that he, *Hifumi Yamada*, might even *possibly*—

"I meant the *vampires*, you idiot."

It's only then that Hifumi notices what the other boy holds in the long fingers of his right hand – not a manga, but a doujin! One of his very own! The most recently published chapter of *Princess Piggles: The Lure of Sharp Fangs*, in fact! Notably, that chapter is at least a week old at this point – he can't spin out a chapter a day like *some* people (*curse you, xxprincesspigglesfanxx2009!*) – but it's impressive that whoever this dirty boy is took the time to print a hard copy. Hifumi wasn't planning on physical copies of *The Lure of Sharp Fangs* until he had enough chapters to make the price worth it, but here was a fan so dedicated to 2D that he'd already—

Get yourself together! Fan or not, this is a critic!

Hifumi stands, pulls himself to his full height of 170cm, then stops. The dirty twink in front of him is well over 180cm.

…

No matter! *He* is the authority on all things Princess Piggles – including the kind of vampires she would encounter! And this boy isn't!

"And what," Hifumi sputters out, "is so wrong about my vampires, Mr.—"

He has never seen this boy in his life.

He waits for the boy to introduce himself.

…

He clears his throat.

“Matsuda,” the boy finally says with a long-suffering sigh. “Matsuda Yasuke.”

Hifumi gulps.

Look, there are a lot of Ultimates at Hope’s Peak, and it’s absurd to think that Hifumi has met them all. He certainly doesn’t know all of them by name! But Ms. Enoshima keeps rattling off all the good points of this Matsuda boy, and she—

Well, she isn’t *2D*, so Hifumi isn’t interested in the slightest.

But he can see the appeal.

Matsuda continues to glower at Hifumi, his face contorted into a scowl.

Why were they fighting again?

Oh. Right.

“You might be the Ultimate Neurologist, Mr. Matsuda,” Hifumi says, standing as straight as he can and meeting Matsuda’s eyes in a way that – in doujin – would show lighting sparks flying between the two of them, “but that does not make you an expert on the tropes of fiction or the desires of its readers! There are a million varieties of vampire, and while the ones I have chosen for *The Lure of Sharp Fangs* may not indulge your *particular* proclivities, I assure you that a number of fans have quite enjoyed—”

“Your vampires are as wrong as the idiot who thought that sunlight makes them sparkle.”

Hifumi gasps.

(He has nothing against the sparkling vampires. In fact, he has considered Princess Piggles sparkling when *she* finally succumbs to a vampire bite. None of the other vampires in his doujin sparkle, but it would only make sense for Princess Piggles to be different from the rest of them! *And sparkle!*)

“You speak,” Hifumi finally says, pulling himself together, “as though vampires were a real phenomenon!” He takes in Matsuda’s unwashed clothes, the shirt that’s only partially tucked in, the bathroom slippers, the greasy dark hair, and the sharp swoop of his cheekbones under paralyzing pale blue eyes.

…

Wait.

Matsuda shrugs. “Suit yourself.” He flips open last week’s chapter again. “But if vampires were real, they would *hate* the way you’ve written them.” Then he stalks off, head in his doujin, ignoring Hifumi’s spluttering attempts at a response.

Hifumi glares after Matsuda. Then he takes a swig of his Diet Coke, pushes the conversation from his head, and returns to examining the newest chapter of *The Lure of Sharp Fangs*. It’s only after he posts the chapter and returns to Boartick’s design that he considers—

Matsuda couldn’t possibly be a vampire, could he?

No, no – vampires aren’t real!

But if they were….

Hifumi pushes himself up, tucks his tablet under his arm, and searches for Matsuda, who by now is long gone. Matsuda *had* looked like a vampire, hadn’t he? Maybe not the whole *unwashed* bit, but the dark hair, the light eyes, the pale skin, the long fingers—

Ms. Enoshima waxes poetic about Mr. Matsuda a lot. It’s only fair that Hifumi uses the same vocabulary for him.

Wait! Perhaps that is precisely *why* Ms. Enoshima speaks so positively of this unwashed scamp! Mr. Matsuda has lured Ms. Enoshima in under false pretenses! Or *no* pretenses! Only his vampiric ability to seduce even the most wayward and strong-willed of women!

…and Ms. Enoshima doesn’t seem particularly *strong-willed* at all!

Hifumi clenches his bottle of Diet Coke again. How dare this miscreant! Ms. Enoshima might not be 2D, but no woman deserves to be taken advantage of this way! If Mr. Matsuda really *is* seducing her, then—

Then *he*, Hifumi Yamada, will get to the bottom of this! He will take on the role of protagonist, and he will save the fair maiden from the clutches of this most despicable vampire!

…as soon as he finds another bottle of Diet Coke!

Two Hours Later…

“Why are you following me?”

Hifumi squeals – in a quite manly manner, if he does say so himself – and sprints behind the nearest bush. He waits a few seconds – a protagonist must *always* wait a few seconds, to make sure they won’t be discovered! Then he pushes his glasses back into place, shoves a few smaller branches out of the way, and squints through the tiny gap he’s created.

Only to find himself staring into the icy eyes of Matsuda Yasuke.

“Boo.”

Hifumi stumbles backward, catching himself just before he falls. He makes as masterful a recovery as he can – Princess Piggles would be proud! – and stands, propping his hands on

either side of his stomach. "Mr. Matsuda! What a coincidence!"

Matsuda glares at him, another doujin – this time *not* one of Hifumi's – dangling from his fingertips. "It's not a coincidence. You've been following me for—" He checks his watch. "—nearly an hour."

"I!" Hifumi swallows. "I have not!" His eyes shift. How would Princess Piggles handle this? "I…was just heading in the same direction! That's all!"

"Mmhm." Matsuda hangs the doujin on the collar of his dirty shirt, shoves his hands in his pockets, and glances upward. "Sun's nice today, isn't it?"

"No, it's not! It's hot and sticky and—"

…

Oh.

Hifumi's eyes narrow. He scans Matsuda. No burning. No smoke. Nothing to suggest he's in any pain, except for the squinting of his eyes as he looks *directly into the sun*. He steps closer. *No sparkles*. Just an unfortunately pungent scent of body odor…and just a hint of garlic.

"You're not very good at this, are you?"

"Well, I have never had reason to suspect that vampires are real before now, Mr. Matsuda!" Hifumi meets Matsuda's eyes as well as he can. "And if *you* are not the vampire of whom you spoke—"

Matsuda rolls his eyes. He tries to close the difference between them, but Hifumi steps back, covering his nose with his arm. Still, Matsuda pushes forward, takes the doujin from his collar, and taps Hifumi's head with it. "If all it takes for you to believe in vampires is a five minute conversation with me, then you are an *idiot*."

"Th-th-then!" Hifumi steps back again, still covering his nose with his arm and breathing through his mouth. He takes a deep breath, then throws his arm to the side like the Masked Meower, the closest thing Princess Piggles has to a love interest (and whom Hifumi frequently uses as such in his doujin). "How can you be so certain about the majority opinion of vampires, Mr. Matsuda? If you are not a vampire yourself, then surely you must know one who can inform you!"

"Or I could be making it up." Matsuda holds Hifumi's gaze like his life depends on it – and maybe it does, if he knows a vampire! One who might be upset with him for revealing their existence! "I could be a dissatisfied customer who simply doesn't like how you write them." He runs his tongue along his teeth – no fangs, not that there's any reason to keep looking.

Hifumi doesn't look away. He is not a man of very strong will, except when he is, and right now, he is! Both as a writer who is doing research *and* as the protagonist of the story where perhaps Mr. Matsuda is being blackmailed by a vampire!

…although that second one seems less and less likely.

"Then how," Hifumi states, pushing his glasses back up, "would you suggest I write them, Mr. Matsuda?"

Matsuda flinches.

Not really, but Hifumi considers the slightest tightening at the corners of Matsuda's eyes – *and his lips!* – as a flinch, and not just annoyed frustration. It counts! …in *his* opinion, anyway!

Got you!

Hifumi tries not to grin. He *fails*, but he tries. "Why don't we have a quick brainstorming session? I would *love* to make my vampires more realistic—"

Matsuda cuts Hifumi off by spinning on his heel – such a fantastically dramatic action! – and storms away. After a few seconds, he shouts out, "Don't follow me!"

Hifumi ignores that command. Truly, Matsuda is incapable of vampiric seduction.

A Few Hours Later…

"Fluffer*nutter!*"

Hifumi draws a huge red circle around his latest attempt at Boartick's vampire design and slashes through it. Another failure!

By Hifumi's estimation, it's been a few hours since Masuda locked himself in his office, and an equal few hours since Hifumi sat against the opposite wall and started working on his doujin. Some of his new designs are solid, but none of them are right for Boartick! The specifics are proving too tricky. His tongue sticks out as he makes more adjustments—

The door across from Hifumi creaks open.

"You're still here?"

"Hold on just a minute, please." Hifumi scowls at his work, deletes it, then turns his tablet off. "Yes, Mr. Matsuda. I'm still here." But he quiets when he sees how dark it's gotten outside. He hadn't noticed while he sketched, too caught up in the creation of things, but now he sees the long shadows and the darkness through the nearest window. He swallows, pretending he isn't afraid. "And if you're going to tell me not to…not to follow you again, then—"

"I'm not." Matsuda shoves his hands into his pockets and shrugs. "Wouldn't do any good. It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"Oh?" Hifumi's eyes light up. If he were drawing himself right now, there would be a

sparkle or star shape where his pupils should be. “Do you sleep in your office, Mr. Matsuda? Are you, perhaps, *hiding* from someone?”

Matsuda snorts. “I wouldn’t call it that.” He glances down the empty hallway, then tilts his head back in a small gesture. “Come in. They’ll start locking the building soon, and if you’re out here, they’ll sweep you out.”

Hifumi rubs his chin. “Isn’t that what you want, Mr. Matsuda?”

“To get rid of you?” Matsuda chuckles, a harsh, dark sound. “Maybe I just wanted to see how long you’d last.”

“W-well then!” Hifumi pushes himself up, takes the final swig from his new bottle of Diet Coke, and shoves his tablet under his arm. He doesn’t look down the hallway before he enters Matsuda’s office – and, worse for him, he doesn’t look inside said office before walking in, which means he stops abruptly with shock just inside, definitely not noticing when Matsuda locks the door behind him. No, he’s more focused on the pale girl with hair as red as blood laid flat on what looks more like an operating table than a bed. “Wh-wh-who—” He stammers out. “Who is *this?*”

This is the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen.

Within reason.

3D, not 2D.

But he can see the appeal.

“A friend.” Matsuda crosses his arms and leans against the now quite locked door. “She got caught by vampires a little while ago.” He nods towards her. “See the holes in her neck?”

Hifumi steps closer. Funny, how he suspected that Mr. Matsuda himself was a vampire only a few hours ago, but now he’s discovered that the unwashed miscreant is protecting this girl! Perhaps he is even a vampire hunter himself! Then it would only make sense that Mr. Matsuda would want accuracy with the vampires portrayed in *The Lure of Sharp Fangs!* Hifumi’s doujin could be used to spread the truth to the masses!

…

Or something like that!

Peering closer, Hifumi can just make out two small red dots on the girl’s neck, with some slight discolored bruising around them. His gaze flicks to her chest – not to ogle! She cannot hold a candle to his perfect Princess Piggles, after all! – and spies its slow, steady rise and fall. Then he steps back, pushes his glasses up, and turns to the unclean boy. “And why do *you* have her, Mr. Matsuda?”\

He shouldn’t assume the Ultimate Neurologist is a hunter, after all. He might be—

“Bait.”

…

Hifumi blinks twice. “Whatever do you mean—”

Then Hifumi feels sharp nails – claws! – piercing into his skin as the hands of the girl behind him dig into his shoulders. He tries to whirl around but finds that he can’t. He lets out a final squeal!

Everything fades to black, the icy eyes of Matsuda Yasuke the last things Hifumi sees.

The Next Day…

Hifumi’s eyes slowly open.

Where…where *is* he?

Hifumi rubs his eyes. He’s in some sort of hallway, not in his room….

All at once, Hifumi remembers. He jumps up! Then he pats himself all over and runs his fingers along both sides of his neck! …he doesn’t *feel* anything different. Would he notice it if he did? Surely if he’d been bitten by something, he would!

It’s only then that Hifumi realizes he’s still right across from the Ultimate Neurologist’s office. He…he must have dozed off while he was waiting for Matsuda to leave.

A few seconds pass.

Hifumi’s nerves calm. He walks over to the office’s door and peers in through its window. He doesn’t see *anyone* – not Matsuda Yasuke, and certainly not the gorgeous vampire girl who’d been in the back of the room. Was it all a dream? Had his mind just…run away with itself?

Hifumi mutters unintelligibly under his breath to himself. He ignores the concerned glance from the Ultimate Nurse as she walks past, and he stoops down to gather his things. Then he notices new doodles on his tablet – art that doesn’t look quite like his normal style, but certainly couldn’t be made by anyone else.

He must have been drawing in his sleep!

Hifumi’s eyes widen as he takes in the new sketches of Boartick. These! Are! *Perfect!* They pay incredible homage to Boartick’s original design, while adding just the right amount of horror to make him *terrifying!* It’s a *little* out of left field, but—

As he scurries away, Hifumi doesn’t notice Matsuda’s gaze on him, and although he swats at their itching, he also doesn’t notice the two small, red dots just behind his right ear. He’ll find them much later, after they’ve scabbed over, but won’t remember enough of this chapter to connect the two.

Princess Piggles would *not* be proud.

…

But *Boartick* would.

A Prayer for the Jugular

Story by rose

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Doubts no longer existed in Tenko's mind.

With the moon beyond her lustrous peak, Tenko stalked the lonesome halls of the Ultimate Academy for Gifted Juveniles. Featherlight footsteps reverberated as loud as her tinny heartbeat. She clenched her fist to her chest, marching along the fourth-floor corridor to a particular research lab. With her other hand positioned behind her back, fingers drumming along the splintery surface of a particular item pilfered from Maki's lab, she strode to the door of the girl she loathed most.

It was late. Only she, Monokuma, and his ill-begotten spawn should have been awake. The other Ultimates must have been asleep, or so she assumed. She thought she heard creaking floorboards in the distance, but shook off the sound as agitated nerves. Either it was her imagination or the tinnitus in her ringing ears worsened the longer she lingered outside the safety of her bedroom.

Still, she steeled herself. She became as resolute as a rock, holding her head high. Raising her free fist, she drew in a sharp breath and knocked.

But as soon as the second tap resounded, the door flung wide open, revealing a face with a smile full of pearly white teeth.

Tenko gnashed down on her molars and swallowed her scream. She backpedaled so quickly that she struck the opposite wall, nicking her palm with her treasure. Eye twitching, Tenko hunched forward, rendered mute as Angie flounced and swayed outside, unblinking.

"Oh, Tenko! What a shock! Did you need something?" she wondered, bobbing her head. "Are you having trouble sleeping? Need a pick-me-up?"

She squared her shoulders, ordering her tone to remain even. "Forget that. How did you know I was outside? I hardly knocked."

"Coincidence! Total coincidence," Angie declared, flitting ahead of Tenko. "I realized I need a candle for the ritual, and I know where to find one at this hour. Let's walk and talk on our way over."

She stopped, resting on her back heel. Lacing her fingers behind her waist, Angie peered over at Tenko, her grin ever-present.

“After all, I’m assured it’s what you really want. I welcome everyone’s company, yours included.”

Tenko sucked on her inner cheek. She moved in tandem with Angie, following her footsteps. The intent behind Angie’s declaration must have been a thinly veiled threat. It was common knowledge that Tenko was never a genuine member of her Student Council, and her betrayal was seemingly nothing more than an expectation or water under the bridge. Angie’s vile deity was not Tenko’s savior, and He never would adhere to her supplication, not that she wished for Him to heed her pleas.

Rather, Angie had the others wrapped around her fingers. Ensnaring them in a web of lies far worse than anything Kokichi could utter, she cloaked them in silk and blanketed them in her shroud. One by one, they fell to her velvet words laden with appeasement until they no longer thought for themselves. They devoted their days to Angie, seeking her approval, trusting in her self-serving oracles, all while she curated more of their affection.

Tenko stewed. No human could cultivate such abrupt adoration. Angie’s guile was monstrous, akin to an unearthly force. Only one conclusion became obvious to Tenko, struck with a realization so sudden she had no choice but to pursue the worst outcome. If she had to forfeit her life, then at the very least, once their master bit the silver bullet, the others would regain their freedom.

She flexed each finger around her treasure. Splinters caressed her callused skin. While it worked in fiction, Tenko trusted it would serve well in reality.

Angie entered the empty side room first. Floorboards creaked underfoot, only to be silenced when Tenko slammed the door shut. Angie whirled around, evidently startled. Candlelights illuminated their visages, surrounded by creeping shadows, enlarging an already suffocating coffin.

As Angie stared at her with eyes like porcelain plates, Tenko straightened her spine and tightened her grip.

“I know what you are.”

Angie’s lips curled. “Nyahaha?”

“You’re a *vampire*.”

One corner of her mouth twitched, causing an eye to crinkle. “Nyahaha*ha*?”

Fueled by her foul play, Tenko jabbed forward, revealing a thick, sturdy wooden stake. The tip was sharp and serrated; it fit as the perfect murder weapon to seal Angie’s fate. No other tool, not a knife or an arrow, would have served Tenko’s plan, for the holy weapon had laid to waste countless corrupted creatures of Angie’s caliber. The classic death, staking the bloodsucker through her heart, suited Angie’s downfall. Then, once Tenko succeeded, Angie’s hold on her friends would dissipate like a malodorous mist.

“A vampire! A dirty, disgusting vampire!” she shouted, mania heightening her voice. “The blood sacrifices? Ha! That’s you feasting on the poor people you tricked and turned. You did it on your island, and now, you’re repeating yourself here! I bet you only want to do the ritual to bring back more victims for your bloodthirsty cause!”

Angie’s jaw set. She glanced between Tenko and the stake. “God is appalled by your blatant blasphemy, Tenko,” she replied, strikingly even.

“But *you* aren’t denying it!”

Angie closed her eyes. She clapped her hands above her head. Tenko could have lunged, spearing it through her chest, but when Angie’s grin fell, Tenko stiffened. She dared to be venerate, feigning her blessings as she sought her God’s word.

Eyes half-lidded, Angie lowered her hands to her waist, stating, “God insists you continue on the basis that you’re *amusing* Him.”

Snorting, Tenko snapped, “Gladly! The Student Council exists because they’re under your spell! Your thrall! You feed on their loyalty! And blood, too! Maybe I haven’t seen any marks on their necks, but there’s no doubt in my mind.”

Angie refused to supply an answer. Tenko tapped the stake on her free palm. Sweat dampened her brow, her uniform clinging to her clammy skin. As the small flames flickered, Tenko could have sworn she saw Angie’s teeth glimmer when she smiled.

“You brought this on yourself, Angie. I didn’t want to take it this far, but for her sake, *everyone’s* sake, I’ll expose you for what you are. You only have yourself to blame when I-!”

“Jealousy, is it?” Angie interjected, pupils darker than the shadows. “Well, that, too, but you’re lonely, aren’t you, Tenko?”

A lightning bolt wouldn’t have incapacitated Tenko as much as Angie’s bombshell insinuation. It could have blitzed through her brain, and it wouldn’t have matched an inkling of the agony sprouting in her chest. Natural color paled from her complexion, draining down her icy body. Tenko froze, her arm as stiff as stone. Trembling fingers threatened to release the stake, worsening as Angie approached, smelling like sea salt and iron.

“Observing from the sidelines, trying to protect someone who sided against you,” Angie said slowly, and cupped Tenko’s offending hand. She stroked Tenko’s slightly rough skin, her plump thumbs running over her wrist and pumping in tune with Tenko’s rapid pulse. She looked at Tenko through her lashes, her touch causing the hairs on her neck to rise, igniting life into the words Tenko rued to hear. “Himiko decided on her own. I nudged her in the right direction, but in the end, she chose to be with me.”

“You-!”

“Hiding your real feelings behind false bravado is silly, isn’t it?” She chuckled, her cool breath caressing Tenko’s tense wrist. “The real reason behind your accusation is that I have what you crave.”

She scowled, wrenching her arm free. The stake aimed for Angie’s heart, but she made no move to protest or defend. Instead, Angie seized Tenko’s wrist, smooth nails biting into her pulse. Grimacing, Tenko leaned back to pull Angie into a throw, but Angie’s smooth voice

invoked her fear once more.

“It doesn’t have to be that way, of course.”

Shadows licked along the walls, encroaching on the outlines of flickering flares. Chills seeped through the room, but failed to numb the heat pervading across her goosebump-riddled flesh. Her brain buzzed with activity, but motions to react halted, the neurons refusing to fire, as if her mind became a jammed gun.

Gritting her teeth, she hissed, “What way?”

“You left the Student Council and brought Shuichi and Maki to stop the first ritual. It angered God, but He and *I* quickly realized why you would go through such lengths.” Angie set one finger to Tenko’s chin, stroking a slow circle. “How pitiful. How sorrowful. You can’t stand how close I’ve become with Himiko.”

“You’re lying! You have to be!”

“Am I?”

Her hand slipped around her neck. Her thumb found her pulse once more, pumping harshly. Angie’s tongue swiped across her lips, Tenko noting faint cracks. She must have been awake for much longer, focusing either on her initial goal or something *more* that stirred the frenzy of Tenko’s terror.

“It’s okay, Tenko. I forgive you. I already did!”

Her airy, careless chirp betrayed their intimacy. Angie shoved herself onto Tenko, and her grin oozed with amusement. As if merely teasing, Angie’s soft, caressing words drove deeper into Tenko, chipping through the chinks in her armor.

“For a lonely girl, you have a truly pure heart. A pure, beating heart dedicated to defending girls. You say others are devoted to me, but your devotion to Himiko is as warm as the blood in your veins. It would make a lovely offering.”

Angie’s murmurs dizzied her like an enchanting, aromatic miasma. Her head ached, and her knees knocked, her calf muscles limp and loose. Tenko’s vision dimmed, as if the shadows glazed over her retinas. She focused solely on Angle’s smiling mask. It must have been a ruse, a means to an end to escape with her life. But the longer her traitorous ears listened, Tenko’s body refused to comply. No matter how she insisted upon herself, she couldn’t escape. In Angie’s steady grasp, as if she had been reduced to her knees and embraced like *them*, Tenko’s willpower faltered.

What’s happening to me? Why am I…compliant?

Angie dipped, and Tenko fell. Wobbling legs collapsed underneath her, and her fingers finally failed. The stake rolled, vanishing into the shroud. She couldn’t feel for it, not when Angie had her in her crosshairs. Eyes half-lidded, Angie leaned over Tenko, one hand still cupping her neck, thumb upon her chin. Heat blossomed in Tenko’s rosy face, her complexion certainly appearing as if Angie had painted them with her preferred colors.

“Angie,” Tenko breathed out, chest rising and falling, “is this how you control them?”

Rather than pacify her, Angie swallowed her sight. Pearl white hair played upon her round cheeks. Along with salt, she smelled of turpentine, her breath hissing with a metallic hint as it ghosted Tenko’s mouth.

Closer and closer, Angie came. Tenko couldn’t stop her, not even when her lips brushed against her throat. As her cheeks flushed with the rosy hue Angie surely adored, Tenko invoked her name.

“You may refuse God’s calling, but you need companionship. You want to be treasured, Tenko, loved as you love Himiko, and I like you well enough. I can give you all the love you desire when you’re mine.”

Without claws, Angie ripped Tenko open, carving a hole for herself in Tenko’s fluttering heart. One hand still resting on her face, Angie raised her head, and Tenko knew she marvelled at her next masterpiece. Whatever weary expression crossed her face became Angie’s design. Her thumb slipped over her quivering lips, her conquest assured. Tenko’s rich blood reached a boiling point under her reverent attention.

Again, she sank to Tenko’s neck, and her lips pulled back, revealing every tooth. Not a dull point to be discovered, her jeer cemented the truth Tenko realized would be taken to her grave.

“After all, I’m always in need of acolytes.”

As Tenko glimpsed the sharp, penetrating overhang of Angie’s growing fangs, she exhaled a deep, relieved sigh once Angie clamped down on her neck, the hand she had intended to deliver the killing blow, instead, streaking through Angie’s hair.

Power Surge

Story by ToxicPineapple

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

"Something's off about her today," Hiyoko declares, apropos of nothing; for a declaration, her voice is hushed, conspiratorial, and Mioda, seated all the way across the table, only makes out the statement because of her advanced hearing. Mahiru, at Hiyoko's elbow, raises an eyebrow in question.

"Her, being...?"

"S-Sonia-san, right?" Tsumiki clarifies, tugging at a piece of her hair and averting her gaze. "I um, well, I noticed too."

Hiyoko blows air through her teeth. She doesn't really like to talk to Tsumiki—and likes it even less when the other girl sees fit to address her *first*—but just this once, she'll move past it... because a bigger and more important enemy sits just two lunch tables away from their own.

The thing is, Sonia Nevermind is a perfect, pretty princess, prim and proper, and thus, she's not a very big *eater*. Hiyoko knows, because she pays attention. She's spent the length of several different lunch periods watching the foreigner princess talking animatedly with her strange best friend Tanaka, and all the while ignoring the (admittedly conservative in the first place) serving of lunch seated on the table in front of her. She always cleans up after herself, never leaves dishes for the janitor to collect, although she could probably get away with it, being royalty and all... but Hiyoko has noticed. Nevermind rarely leaves the cafeteria with a clean plate.

Even so, today's behaviour verges more into concerning and out-of-character than insufferable or prissy. Sonia's fingers curl loosely around her chopsticks—perfect form, perfect posture, Hiyoko couldn't find something to criticise about her technique even if she was trying to, and she is trying to—and she doesn't move. She sits upright, eyes glossy, lips slightly parted. Stares off into the distance with an uncharacteristic blankness in her face, only showing any signs of life at all when Tanaka, beside her, grunts for her attention.

It really is weird. Nevermind is a lot of things, but Hiyoko knows she isn't careless in her friendships. Not to say she isn't awful and fake, but she's more of a tryhard than a mean girl, the sort to put all her chips into getting people to like her... Presumably, so they'll be loyal to her later on, so she shows her true colours. Something malicious like that seems likely, from a girl like Sonia Nevermind. Her behaviour this afternoon is truly strange, though, and it hasn't just been the lunch period. Nevermind dozed through their morning

classes, even though she's usually the type to take neat, pretty, colour coded notes, eyes big and engaged as she absorbs every bit of the source material.

…Hiyoko has borrowed these notes, a couple of times, caught unawares the evening before a quiz or exam. Nevermind is always happy to share. Hiyoko is sure that it wouldn't be good for her image, if she ever said no to a request like that, even from someone like Hiyoko, who hates her guts… and who she surely hates as well, because how could she not?

Mahiru's elbow is in the perfect position to jab into Hiyoko's upper arm, and does so now. "Hello? Earth to Hiyoko-chan…?"

Hiyoko squeaks and jabs her back. "Knock it off! I'm just thinking. You see what I'm talking about, right? She's totally out of it."

"To be clear, we *are* talking about the princess, aren't we?" Mahiru's friend, Sato, who Hiyoko tolerates if not outright likes, cocks her head to the side and raises an eyebrow. "You didn't clarify."

"Of course we're talking about her." Hiyoko puffs her cheeks out. "You were probably thinking about it too, weren't you? Everyone's obsessed with her."

Just another item on the long list of things Hiyoko detests about Sonia Nevermind. She's stunning, intelligent, and charismatic, but just weird enough to avoid being uninteresting. She's kind and nonjudgemental, humble, always deferring her natural place as a leader and insisting that she be treated as nothing more than a classmate. She smiles, when she sees Hiyoko in the halls—and it does something ridiculous to Hiyoko's chest. Undoubtedly some kind of magical princess superpower, a poison administered through the eyes perhaps. Who else but Nevermind would be capable of such a thing?

Sato and Mahiru exchange glances, but say nothing. Mioda, still across the table, nods her head fervently.

"Oh totally! Ibuki's completely obsessed! Hey, what colour do you think her eyes are, Mikan-chan?"

"M-Me?" Tsumiki stammers. "Aren't they green?"

"Huuuuuh? Ibuki totally thought they were grey!"

They're both wrong, but what more could Hiyoko expect from a pair of simpletons? Mioda doesn't have two brain cells to rub together and Tsumiki is completely unworthy of any time or attention—that is to say, neither of them are qualified or anywhere near smart enough to grasp the reality of Nevermind's eyes, which are crystalline, and shift hue in the sunlight, and crinkle at the edges whenever they lock with Hiyoko's, and…

Stare, now, vacantly, at a spot on the wall. Hiyoko lets out another huff, but before she can say anything else, or bring the topic back to what she'd initially meant to raise as a concern, the bell rings, signalling that lunch is over. Across the cafeteria, Nevermind stands, so abruptly that she nearly knocks over her bowl of rice and fish… and that she stumbles visibly, swaying to the side so dramatically that Tanaka, who hates touch, has to lurch forward and haul her back to her feet.

Hiyoko's heart is doing something funny. Racing… and her throat's gone all dry. This is an opportunity like she's never been faced with before. People as perfect as Sonia Nevermind simply don't exist, royalty or not. Hiyoko will admit to being a little obsessed with the girl—but again, who isn't—but it's only because she just doesn't understand. Hasn't been able to figure it out as of yet, what it is that Nevermind must be hiding from everybody.

She can figure it out now, though. When will she get a chance like this again?

"Pig barf, clean up my leftovers," Hiyoko instructs, and swings her legs out from under the lunch table.

"A-Ah, okay, um," Tsumiki's eyes dart between Hiyoko and Nevermind, where she hasn't stopped staring all through the lunch period. "You're going to, to make sure that Sonia-san is alright, I take it?"

Hiyoko grumbles. Another overly simple question from an overly simple person. She doesn't see fit to justify it with a response… but Mahiru is also sitting at this lunch table, and looking at Hiyoko in confusion, so she clears her throat as she leans down and draws her school bag over her shoulder.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of Sonia Nevermind," Hiyoko decides. "There's something wrong with her and I'm gonna figure out what it is."

Mahiru's eyes are on Sato again, just for a moment. The two girls share a sigh, but Hiyoko's already halfway across the cafeteria, and doesn't hear it.

"You do that, Hiyoko-chan," Mahiru murmurs, and says it so softly that only Mioda, with her uncanny hearing, is able to bark out a laugh in response.

☽ ☽ ☽ ☾ ☾ ☾

Tanaka Gundham, though odd in many ways, is a reliable friend. He's also a reliable acquaintance, because he takes Nevermind directly to the nurse's office despite her fussing, which Hiyoko can make out even halfway down the hallway, trailing the two at a distance. When Tanaka exits, adjusting the folds of his jacket and drawing the neck of his scarf over his face, Hiyoko waits for him to disappear around the corner… then slinks up to peer through the rectangular window on the door into the infirmary.

Nevermind sits on a cot, alone. Their nurse is out for the moment, it seems, an unreliable bastard at the best of times. Certainly no Tanaka Gundham, but again, it's working out in Hiyoko's favour here. She doesn't want to carry out an interrogation with witnesses around. Determining that Nevermind is well and truly unaccompanied, Hiyoko steels herself, fixes her hair, wipes a bit of sweat off her palms onto her skirt, and then steps inside.

The soft padding of Hiyoko's slippers against the floor should alert Nevermind to her presence, but the other girl only seems to still further. Her eyes don't shift, directed at a specific spot on the floor. (Just to explore all avenues, Hiyoko follows that gaze, and finds nothing of interest. She's probably just staring to have somewhere to look. Hiyoko used to do that during dance practices, to try and make the time pass a little faster, trying to shorten the length of time she had to spend rehearsing, so she could sooner return home to

her father.

…She hasn't thought about doing that in a while, and banishes the thought from her mind now. Empathising with Nevermind is the fail state, the first sign of weakness, and Hiyoko can't afford to be weak.)

She clears her throat. Nevermind, who is clearly aware of her presence, stiffens just a little more, and her hands flex on the surface of the cot on which she sits. She finally graces Hiyoko with her attention, but says nothing… so Hiyoko takes the initiative, as she often has to.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Saionji-san," is Nevermind's response. Her voice is soft, eyes half-lidded. She swallows with great effort, and her tongue darts over her lower lip. It looks… cracked. Dry in a way Hiyoko's never seen it. Her skin's all pale, too, and clammy. It's a weird and unflattering look for the princess, not that it makes her any less pretty, frustratingly, it's just…

It makes Hiyoko's stomach twist a little. "That's my name, not an answer to my question. What's your deal right now, huh? I've never seen you so," out of a lack of ways to describe it, Hiyoko gestures broadly with her hand, "y'know? It's unnatural."

Nevermind takes in a deep breath, then lets it out. Her eyes close. It's all a very controlled, deliberate movement, but she's betrayed by the way her knuckles flex, so pale that they don't even go white, but it's obvious she's digging her nails into the meat of her palms. Hiyoko watches her throat bob when she swallows and takes a step closer for a better look.

To her surprise, Nevermind jolts back, eyes snapping open. "Don't—"

"Wha—?" Hiyoko's brow furrows. She takes another exploratory step forward. Nevermind's hands fly over her face, pressing into her mouth, over her nostrils. She begins to quake, and Hiyoko never met a scab she didn't pick at, so she closes the remaining distance between them and leans as far forward as she dares without outright pressing her forehead into Nevermind's, squinting at her.

Her bones are creaking with the effort it's taking her to stay still, all but laid out on the cot, her elbows pressing into the mattress. She's so, so pale, and bits of her fringe plaster to her forehead with that sweat. It's unfair how pretty she is even then. This close, Hiyoko can smell her, unnaturally sweet, almost sickly… with the bitter tinge that is common in most flowers. Hiyoko presses incrementally closer. Nevermind shudders.

"Please," she breathes out, all but inaudible, her voice muffled by the press of her hands against her mouth, "I don't want—I cannot—"

"I really don't get you," Hiyoko confesses, because she doesn't. Her ears and her face are burning, she's sure Nevermind can hear the way her heart races. It's so strange, because they're so close together, but Hiyoko can't hear even a bit of it, Nevermind's breath, her pulse. "Are you just hungry? It doesn't make you a better girl if you skip out on eating, you know. It just means you make more trouble for the people who like you… and pretty much everyone likes you. You should be less selfish."

Another controlled swallow. Nevermind's eyes open. Her pupils are massive, inky pools of black that swallow the thin ring of her irises. Hiyoko can't make out the colour anymore.

"It is exactly the opposite," Nevermind rasps. "If I indulged—there could be nothing more selfish."

Hiyoko raises an eyebrow. "What, are you anorexic?"

Oddly, Nevermind laughs at that. Her hands shift to uncover her mouth, fingers still clamped over her chin. She licks her lips again, and her eyes, so big, trail from Hiyoko's face to… her neck. And stay there, staying there, her lips slightly parted, just enough that Hiyoko can see her teeth, perfectly white and shiny, really, how can a person have such perfect teeth, even her canines are so unnaturally sharp that it's almost as if she's a…

As if she's a…

Hiyoko blinks and looks at Nevermind once again, assessing her properly. This close, she should feel the warmth emanating off Nevermind's body… but there is none. Reaching out, Hiyoko palms her wrist, and flinches back at how *frigid* Nevermind's skin is, like all the blood was drained from it, like she has no heart in her chest or air circling through her lungs.

Like a zombie, or a… vampire. And then it clicks: Nevermind said *if I indulged, there could be nothing more selfish*, and Hiyoko thinks back on every lunch period she's spent watching the girl neglect to eat, every time Nevermind has smiled at her in the hall and then scurried away, head ducked between her shoulders, lips drawn into a thin line.

Hiyoko tilts her head to the side. "I knew you had a secret."

Nevermind had squeaked when Hiyoko touched her, but remains very quiet now, very still, almost like a statue. She doesn't even breathe, which is how Hiyoko knows that *she* knows she's been found out… but she doesn't say anything. And Hiyoko must be a little bit crazy—maybe she's holding her breath a little too, being this close—but her mind begins to race, and it doesn't take it long to reach the inevitable conclusion. The knowledge she's craved for, the *power* she's been dreaming of… it would be so easy, in this moment, to reach out and take it.

Hiyoko just needs to know one other thing. "Hey. Does Tanaka know?"

After a beat, Nevermind shakes her head. Her lips part around the words, the confirmation of the fact that Hiyoko is the only person who has found out… but Hiyoko doesn't have the time to listen to it. Or rather, she lacks the self-restraint. She's always been a bit childish, if she has to be completely honest with herself. It's how she's survived in this world, thus far… Though in this event, it might be the way that she gets in too deep.

Not that that's a concept that's ever fazed Hiyoko before. She straddles Sonia's legs, grabs her shoulder firmly, and turns her own body so her neck is pressed into the princess' nose. It's an easy adjustment, and Hiyoko finds that her limbs move largely without her instruction, as if she instinctively knows what to do. That bitter smell is more powerful now, Hiyoko's own nose pressed into Sonia's temple, and it's borderline addictive. Hiyoko takes in a deep breath, inflates her lungs, and shuts her eyes.

“Take, Princess,” Hiyoko mumbles. She needs this too, she realises—it will give her power over Sonia Nevermind. It will give her—Sonia Nevermind.

Sonia mumbles something. A curse, maybe, or a thanks. Her lips press against Hiyoko’s neck, a whisper of softness, before Hiyoko feels the telltale prickle of teeth sinking into skin. It hurts, but there’s something about it that is—dizzyingly good. Maybe a part of Hiyoko has always been looking for something like this, something that’s just a little bit out of her control.

When Hiyoko begins to grow woozy, Sonia’s hands lift to her lower back and cradle her. Powerful, fingers long enough to span the length of her shoulderblades. Hiyoko’s vision spots at the edges, and when Sonia reemerges from her neck, licking her lips once more, Hiyoko can barely make out her perfect, pretty features at all.

Just a tinge of a blush, a warmth that wasn’t in Sonia’s face prior to this... blood. Hiyoko’s blood.

“Saionji-san,” comes Sonia’s murmur. Her voice is so tender. “I am indebted to you.”

Hiyoko wheezes out a small laugh and lets her eyes fall closed. She thinks... that Sonia will take care of her.

“Good.”

Merch Spotlight

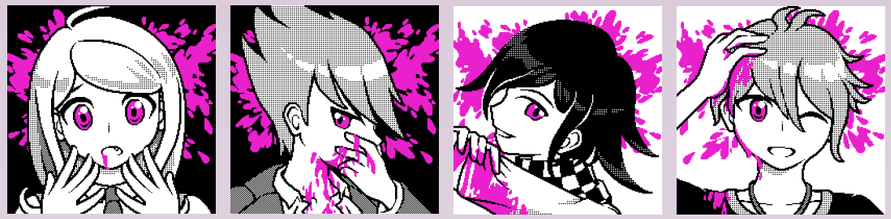
Print by Pretzel

Wallpaper and Sticker Sheet by Nia

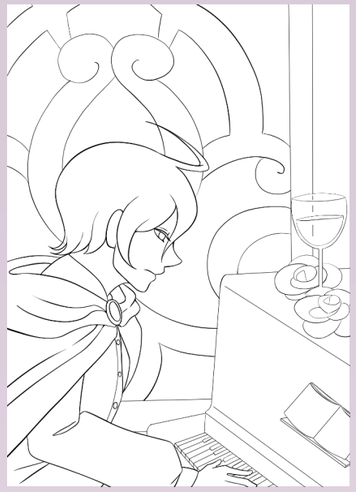
Icons and Stickers by bluejayboju

Icons and Wallpaper by Zeph

Icons and Sticker Sheet by Joyful Sanctuary



Coloring Sheet by mowuune



Wallpaper and Sticker Sheet by Harper

Emotes and Wallpaper by Foldable Mattress

Credits

Cover Artist
caeryn
caeryn
ccaeryn
caerynart

Merch Artist
bluejayboju
bluejayboju
bluejayboju

Merch Artist
Foldable Mattress
foldable_mattress
foldable-mattress

Merch Artist
Harper
cryzono
harpoon__gun
harpoon__gun

Merch Artist
Joyful Sanctuary
joyfulsanctuary
joyfulsanctuary
TheJoySanctuary

Merch Artist
mowuune
mowuune
mowuune
mowuune

Merch Artist
Nia
maho.nias
mahonias

Merch Artist
Pretzel
xxshumai
xxshumai
xxshumai

Merch Artist
zeph
nepetathecats
sushi_haras

Page Artist
Avis
templegate
theav0cadobaby
theavocadobaby

Page Artist
Clara
cl4ret-10ko
Cl4reT_

Page Artist
Colaluu
colaluu
cola.lu.u

Page Artist
Emmy
hellscap3
hellscap3
hellscap3

Page Artist
FaeOfStars
faeofstars
faeofstars
faeofstars

Page Artist
fluttervixen
fluttervixen
flutter.vixen.art

Page Artist
gay_papa
coolguy_gp
bruhkus
gay-papa

Page Artist
gayest.of.them.all
gayest.of.them.all
gayest-of-them-all

Page Artist
grrotto
grrotto
grr_otto
grr.otto

Page Artist
justsomedumbstuff
justsomedumbstuff

Page Artist
Kirisstar
kirisstar_
kirisstars
kinaqua10

Credits

Page Artist
lillachan
lillachan
Lilla_Chan
art.lillachan

Page Artist
Lydia
paris-in-space
paris.in.space.art

Page Artist
Lynn
justlynnstore
shadowmatcha

Page Artist
Mae
vhsghostricks
vhsghostricks
vhsghostricks

Page Artist
Mango
mangoisgay
mangoisgay

Page Artist
Medi
1medichan1
1medichan1
1medichan1

Page Artist
Meteoris
Meteoris
meteoris

Page Artist
Michelle
foxlover5517
Cara foxlover2517

Page Artist
Partyu
partyu.art
partyu.art
partycannoninc

Page Artist
RainbowCheshire
rainbow.cheshire
rainbow-cheshire
rainbow-cheshire

Page Artist
Ravensa
ravensa
ravensa
ravensa.rah

Page Artist
Roarsh
roarshackle

Page Artist
Serrannitto
serrannitto
serrannitto
serranito

Page Artist
sketchy.png
skxtchy_png
sketchypng

Page Artist
thefloralpeach
thefloralpeach
thefloralpeach-art
thefloralpeach

Page Artist
TwinkleLitchii
TwinkleLitchii
TwinkleLitchii
TwinkleLitchii

Page Artist
Villain
villainartist
villainartist

Page Artist
zetsubobu
zetsubobu

Writer
Bandit
aparticularbandit
aparticularbandit

Writer
Emi
platonics
piatonics

Credits

Writer
Jimcloud

Jimcloud
amamicorp

Writer
Kalcifer

candidateofloyalty
Kalcifer

Writer
Karakuri

Kuusou_Karakuri

Writer
Keane

peachykeane

Writer
Nelly

DRbrainrot
11037nonsense

Writer
rose

kibasniper
KibaSniper
KibaSniper

Writer
Rumi

ultimaid
ultimaids

Writer
ToxicPineapple

toxicpineapplex
ToxicPineapple

Credits

Head, Art & Organization Mod
RainbowCheshire

rainbow.cheshire
rainbow-cheshire
rainbow-cheshire

Head, Art & Social Media Mod
zetsubobu

zetsubobu

Writing Mod
Rumi

ultimaid
ultimaids
ultimaid.ig

Merch Mod
Zeph

nepetathecats
sushi_haras

Finance Mod
FaeOfStars

faeofstars
faeofstars
faeofstars

Graphics Mod
Lynn

justlynnstore
shadowmatcha

Formatting Mod
lillachan

lillachan
Lilla_Chan
art.lillachan

This zine is a compilation of fan work dedicated to Spike Chunsoft's game Danganronpa. The contributors included inside this zine do not claim any proprietary rights towards Danganronpa or its characters, only their individual pieces herein.